



## A Schoolboy's Diary and Other Stories

*Robert Walser , Damion Searls (Translation) , Ben Lerner (Introduction)*

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This new collection of more than seventy stories by the iconic modern writer Robert Walser, includes stories that have appeared in *Harper's Magazine*, *n+1* online, *Vice*, and elsewhere. Also included is the complete "Fritz Kocher's Essays," the "collected works," so to speak, of a boy who died young, consisting entirely of classroom writing assignments on themes such as "Music," "Christmas," and "The Fatherland." As the opening title sequence of Walser's first book, this was a brilliant way to frame and introduce his unique voice, oscillating wildly as it does between naïveté (the ludicrous teacher wearing "high boots, as though just returning from the Battle of Austerlitz"), faux-naïveté, and faux-faux-naïveté ("Factories and the areas around them do not look nice. I don't understand how anyone can be around such unclean things. All the poor people work in the factories, maybe to punish them for being so poor").

*A Schoolboy's Diary and Other Stories* is centered around schoolboy life—the subject of his greatest novel, *Jakob von Gunten*—and dispatches from the edge of the writer's life, as Walser's modest, extravagant, careening narrators lash out at uncomprehending editors, overly solicitous publishers, and disdainers of Odol mouthwash. There are vignettes that swoon over the innocent beauties of the Swiss landscape, but from sexual adventures on a train, to dissecting an adulterous love triangle by "wading knee-deep into what is generally called the Danish or psychological novel," to three stories about Walser's service in the Swiss military during World War I, the collection has an unexpected range of subject matter.

### A Schoolboy's Diary and Other Stories Details

Date : Published September 3rd 2013 by NYRB Classics (first published January 1st 2013)

ISBN : 9781590176924

Author : Robert Walser , Damion Searls (Translation) , Ben Lerner (Introduction)

Format : ebook 208 pages

Genre : Short Stories, Fiction, European Literature, German Literature

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## From Reader Review A Schoolboy's Diary and Other Stories for online ebook

### Karen Carlson says

A compilation of the early-20th-C Swiss writer's short fiction. Took me a while to catch on to the first segment; the middle segment was right in my wheelhouse, a compendium of flash. FMI see my blog post at *A Just Recompense* .

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### Sean says

For readers new to Robert Walser as well as those who consider him an old friend, this collection published by NYRB provides a delightful survey of his idiosyncratic short prose, which was the bread-and-butter of his working writer years. Spanning the length of Walser's published career, the selections reflect all the best aspects of his 'little prose pieces': the absurdity, humor, pathos, and poignancy.

Overall, I found this collection more accessible than *Speaking to the Rose* and more consistent in its selections than *Selected Stories*. On the other hand, I place *Masquerade and Other Stories* squarely on par with this one, so either of these would be good places to start with Walser's short prose in English.

This book welcomes a new Walser translator onto the scene, Damion Searls, thus sidestepping the perpetual Bernofsky-Middleton debate among readers of Walser in English. Searls, who has translated many other fantastic writers, including Thomas Bernhard, Ingeborg Bachmann, Proust, Rilke, etc., does an admirable job of rendering these 'Walserings' into English.

There are more than 70 short pieces collected here, most previously untranslated into English, and while there isn't a rigid order, the pieces do flow in a pleasing manner, guided as they are, in Searls' words, 'by themes of beginnings and writing'. This one below leans more toward the prose poetry end of the spectrum, but as always, Walser's short prose for the most part resists classification, which makes it feel all the more authentic in its voice.

#### MORNING AND NIGHT

Early in the morning, how good, how blindingly bright your mood was, how you peeked into life like a child and, no doubt, often enough acted downright fresh and improper. Enchanting, beautiful morning with golden light and pastel colors!

How different, though, at night—then tiring thoughts came to you, and solemnity looked at you in a way you had never imagined, and people walked beneath dark branches, and the moon moved behind clouds, and everything looked like a test of whether you too were firm of will and strong.

In such a way does good cheer constantly alternate with difficulty and trouble. Morning and night were like wanting to and needing to. One drove you out into vast immensity, the other pulled you back into modest smallness again.

[May 1920]

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## Hadrian says

Now I think I'm starting to understand the appeal and dizzying techniques of Robert Walser. He writes short stories about wandering children, soldiers enlisting and lovers running away but he does so in a beguiling way, where he hides the most complex feelings in simple expressions. Even a simple naïve denial of knowing can be interpreted in many ways.

The longest collection of stories in the book, "A Schoolboy's Diary", is a chief example of his gifts. Walser writes convincingly in the voice of a young smart schoolboy, but one who knows the role of obedience and authority, and subverts it. He writes a metaphor about colors and existence, then coyly asks the teacher if it's right.

There may be appearance of outward tranquility here, but there's something deeper which lies unanswered. That's Walser.

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## Ben Winch says

Not essential. Not nearly. Maybe moreso than *Berlin Stories*, but we're on the tail-end of the Walser thing now, and this is no place to start. I wouldn't have bought it (I've got seven Walser books already, three of them story – or 'prose piece' – collections, and by the time I got to the fifth – *Speaking to the Rose* – I was aware that my obsession had passed), but somehow I'd conceived a yearning for the complete *Fritz Kocher's Essays*, Walser's first published book, presented here with illustrations by brother Karl Walser. Sad to say, I'm no longer sure why I cared so much about Fritz in the first place, but I *am* sure that the version translated by Susan Bernofsky in *Masquerade and Other Stories* (Johns Hopkins, 1990, probably the most beautiful edition of his work I've seen in English – up there with New Directions' *The Assistant* and *The Tanners*, in any case), though incomplete, is superior.

When autumn comes, the leaves fall from the trees to the ground. Actually I should have said:  
When the leaves fall, it is autumn. I need to improve my style. My last paper was marked: style wretched.

(Susan Bernofsky, *Masquerade...*)

When Autumn comes, the leaves fall off of the trees onto the ground. Actually I should say it like this: When the leaves fall, Autumn is here. I have to work on improving my style. Last time the teacher wrote: Style, wretched.

(Damion Searls, *A Schoolboy's Diary*.)

Does anyone out there like the second version better? You ask me, no way does Walser need to be *more* convoluted. It gets worse:

This is likely to be my last prose piece. All sorts of considerations make me believe it's high time this shepherd boy stopped writing and sending off prose pieces and retired from a pursuit apparently beyond his abilities. I'll gladly look about for another line of work that will let me break my bread in peace.

(‘The Last Prose Piece’, Bernofsky.)

This is probably my last prose piece. There are all sorts of considerations that lead me to conclude that it is high time for a goathead boy like myself to be done with the composing and submitting of prose pieces and abandon this clearly too difficult occupation. I am happy to look around for another line of work that might be possible for me to eat my bread in peace.

(‘The Last Prose Piece’, Searls.)

Now, I don’t speak or read German, and I’m also halfway through Searls’s translation of Nescio and loving it, so I don’t mean to criticise either Searls’s fidelity to the text or his overall skill as a translator, but Jeez, he’s racked up 25 *percent* more words than Bernofsky here, most of them plain irritating and unmusical (‘There are,’ ‘that’, ‘that’ again, ‘like myself’, ‘to be done with the’, ‘of’, ‘this clearly too difficult’, ‘that might make it possible for me’). And while I’ve read enough Walser to be familiar with this clearly Walseresque (or Walser-inspired) tone, and it *may* even be possible that Bernofsky has ‘cheated’ and improved on Walser somehow, I just didn’t enjoy Searls’s style. Some of it was good, it’s true, and I can always dip into Walser when I’m in the mountains or the forest in the sunshine and enjoy it, but I couldn’t help mentally scrubbing out or underlining words or phrases throughout. The first sentence of the long story ‘Hans’ is a kicker! I can’t bring myself to copy out the whole thing so I’ll start from halfway:

... he went out to the nearby lake where he sat down on a bench provided for such restful sojourns under the finely forking, delicate branches of a willow tree, so that, while in conformity to the gloomy weather it was raining out of the gray summer evening sky into the lake as though crying as if out of tear-filled eyes, he could sit for an hour there and dream.

I mean, please, someone tell me that’s a typo: ‘as though crying as if out of tear-filled eyes’! Surely Searls has accidentally left the remnants of two drafts in there at once! But then surely there’s something wrong with that whole ‘while in conformity to the gloomy weather it was raining’ bit too, isn’t there? I gave up on this story.

And that’s the other thing: even if Bernofsky (or the also excellent Christopher Middleton) had translated these pieces, I’m not convinced they’re among Walser’s best work. I, anyway, coulda lived without ‘em. Get Middleton’s *Selected Stories* (AKA *The Walk*). Get *Masquerade*. Or if you really wanna hear him twist his tongue in knots, get *Speaking to the Rose* or *The Robber*. Me, I’ll be re-reading the great stuff for years (I read Middleton’s ‘Kleist in Thun’ to my girlfriend the other day, and couldn’t enunciate for crying), but I can’t see myself ever loving this edition, despite my soft spot for Fritz Kocher.

A great deed cannot obliterate the laborious succession of days. Life doesn’t stand still on the day of a battle, far from it; history alone makes a momentary pause, and then it, too, impelled by imperious life, must rush on.

(‘The Battle of Sempach,’ from *Masquerade*...)

*That’s* what I love about Walser, that right there. Not self-mockery, not experimentalism, not packing the maximum possible about-turns into a sentence. Just insight, humble regard for reality and love of the beauty in words. ‘Impelled by imperious life’! Now that’s writing! Rush on!

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## M. Sarki says

Each morning as a part of my meditation before getting on to a brisk walk with my dog and then attempting some sort of composition I read at least four pages of this fine little book. After having read already much of Robert Walser and preferring his novels to his short stories I found this book to be charming in a most surprising way. Perhaps it was this new translation, but the spirit behind the writing seemed to come through in ways I have never experienced before. I can never quite figure out why Walser moves me the way he does as his writing is so simple and straight forward as to suggest a young child is speaking to me. A very smart young child. I continually shake my head at Robert Walser and wonder how he did it. Not sure if I will ever find the time again to read this book, but it was one of the most worthwhile events of my study this year. The following three reading updates says it all for me:

"Everyone under thirty years of age shall be required to read at least the beginning of this book."

"Very lovely book here. Nobody quite like Walser."

"Sometimes I wonder what all the fuss is about with Walser's short prose, but then I keep coming back."

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### **Steven Felicelli says**

Walser's recent resurrection is more bio-based than work-based. The latter without the former is charmingly unremarkable, but taken together, Walser's 'story' deserves retelling.

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### **Seemita says**

That is the most useful thing about school: It tires you out, upsets you, gets you going, it nourishes the imagination, it is the anteroom, the waiting room as it were, of life.

Neat Poster. And a far neater mind who put this right at the entrance of this school. Alright then, let's get in.

### **Morning Session:**

A gentleman walked into the class and took the teacher's chair. He introduced himself as Robert Walser. Not bad for a name. He was impeccably suited, with sober, black buttons wrapping his moderate build but the creases at the wrist were conspicuous. Perhaps he writes a little more than everything else he does; he writes without care.

He didn't ask for opening of text-books or jotting notes. Nor did he ask any questions that would have sent me home. Instead, he asked us to look out. Yeah, like out of the window. Funny fella. But anything that keeps me away from textbooks, yay! to that! So, I looked out with a glint in my eyes and saw hundreds of juxtaposing images. The sky, the trees, the playground, the sand, the tar roads, the buildings, the cars, the gardens, the chatter, the boys, the girls, the flirting, the peeking; they all dancing in my eyes like a man-made fume blazing down a theatre stage. But what was I to make of them? I wanted to ask Mr. Walser but he looked content in sending us into our imagination trail. Perhaps he wanted us to come back and initiate a discussion? Who knows.

### **Lunch-Break:**

I was glad it was time to gorge on my tomato-lettuce-cucumber sandwiches. Having not found any singularly concrete piece of mind-boggling or sense-sweeping substance throughout the last session, I was determined to draw strength from the food for tummy if not the food for soul. Ha! Watch out Mr. Walser. I ain't listening to your tricks anymore.

### **Afternoon Session:**

And Mr. Walser was back! I wondered if he stepped into our class by mistake. I quickly checked my timetable and it appeared to be allocated to a different subject. But the teacher was the same! What? How can that be? But... well, ok; perhaps I had underestimated his degrees. But the same teacher meant our gazing continued. I was sort of getting used to that activity when all at once he quipped: "What do you hear?" I am sorry but did you say *hear*? "Listen carefully and you will hear voices." "Voices? Yeah, the banter of school kids" "No, voices that are not as easily audible; voices that aren't exactly there but yet, they seethe in invisible pockets." What? Am I in a school or a cemetery? Anyway... I threw my earlobes into the air, opening them full to detect voices. I heard some rustling at the best. The voices (that of my fellow students) were a useless cacophony. But Mr. Walser insisted that voices of wondrous textures lurked in the air and only those with the heart of a musician can catch the notes. I wanted to be first one to raise my hand and announce my musical bent. But I heard only fleeting sound. Was I hearing it wrong? Wouldn't Mr. Walser consider telling just *how* am I supposed to position myself, calm my hyperactive mind, tame my fickle heart and focus? To aim for that one point where music was spurting out in fountains? But he remained in the background, saying not another word.

### **Short-Break:**

I jumped out of my seat and set on a short stroll across the school corridor. When I reached the next turn, I ran into our bulky notice board. A new notice was up: Mr. Robert Walser invites application from students to undertake a day tour on Friday, the 15th. Interested students may collect the form from office and drop them into the box placed near Hall R. Whaaaaa..? That's it? What is the day trip about? Not a word on that?

*"School is the unavoidable choker around the neck of youth, and I confess that it is a valuable piece of jewelry indeed."*

### **Evening Session:**

Lo and Behold! Mr. Walser! For taking this session too! I sprung my hand minutes after he entered and asked him about the day trip. 'My dear girl, how did you fare in the first two sessions?' "I don't know" I said. "I liked your approach but I am afraid I couldn't detect any motivating lessons. You refreshed my vision by pointing me to a world vivid with activities and perhaps, learnings. You were not the other teachers I am used to and I was excited at the prospect of being taught in a foreign albeit promising tongue. But you never prodded, never interrupted, never pushed tantalizing comments or arguments that might have set my mind into action. I don't know if I am reading it proper or pushing my judgment prematurely but with a full 208 minutes dedicated to a world of visible beauty, I wasn't quite sure how different *you* made it out to be. I mean in this class, all of us read and all of us are taught. But every student learns things differently not just because he/ she is different but also because the teachers are different. You, Sir, presented to me a picture which was gorgeous when you began revealing it but regretfully, turned routine by the time the whole was disclosed. I am afraid I might not be ready to go on any elaborate day trip that you might organize in near future. But believe me, I would like to sit in another of your class and attempt to understand exactly what you intended to showcase in the movie whose trailer was worth every minute," And without waiting for his reply, I walked out of the class.

*Remain, dear question, nice and unanswered, I beg of you.*

## Adam says

This is a truly wonderful book.

It is rare for a reader to come upon a writer who can instill such joyous exuberance as Robert Walser and his wide-eyed and amiable narrators can. This collection of seventy or so short stories follows narrators as they wander through the world, taking in as much sensory stimulation as they can. Walser excels in his ability to breathe life into the image of a rural landscape with arresting metaphor and simile, and Damion Searls has done a remarkable job translating Walser's joie de vivre into English.

The collection opens with Fritz Kocher's Essays, a collection of classroom essays by the eponymous fictitious character who died at an unfortunately young age. These essays touch on everything from the seasons to music to the role nationalism plays in the lives of young European men in the years before World War I. Kocher delights in ruminating on any topic given to him by his schoolteacher, but bristles when asked to come up with his own topic, saying "I don't like hinting around for a topic, I like looking for beautiful, delicate words." Kocher's fealty to authority and self-deprecating tongue-in-cheek naivete set up an interesting dichotomy in which this doomed young man struggles between his desire to be obedient to authority and simultaneously free from its suffocating restraints.

The rest of the collection, with the exception of the last (and longest) short story "Hans," are small pieces that follow characters through the world while bound entirely within their own solipsistic views. Walser's playfulness often shows up in the form of authorial insertions or narrative ruptures that make light of Walser's writing, constantly interrupting to make a point or a joke. There is a hilarious moment in "All Right Then" where Walser spends a disjointed paragraph describing a family having tea, only to interrupt himself with "Hey writer! Jesus! What's wrong with you? Are you insane?" He counters his own attack, saying he just doesn't feel "writerish" at the moment. He then spends a full page writing about the virtues of Odol mouthwash and how such a mouthwash can lead to the rise and fall of entire nations. The entire Charlie Kaufman-esque story is uproariously funny.

Walser also has quiet, contemplative pieces, such as "The Heathstone," in which the narrator happens upon an ancient granite stone and has a deeply moving moment of brooding on the impermanence of life and the stoic immortality of earth and nature. He says, in one of my favorite passages of the book, "Everywhere around you, sensitive human beings die. Generations follow generations, which, like dreams, and similar to mere gentle breaths of wind, surface and vanish away again. You know no weakness. Impatience is foreign to you. Thoughts do not touch you and feelings do not approach you. And yet you live, you are living, you lead your stony existence. Tell me, are you alive?"

For all the beauty and splendor of Walser's writing--and there are passages here that will simply leave you breathless--there is a deep sadness and isolation; these narrators are caught within their own worlds, somehow unwilling or unable to forge any considerable relationship with another character. The narrators are all men, most of them young, observing the world without actually engaging with it. In "Hans" Walser points this out explicitly; after following a narrator who spends the first dozen or so pages reminiscing about the towns he would visit in his youth, Walser takes an entire paragraph to contemplate just how alienating and unfulfilling it can be to be "too much the spectator and correspondingly much too little the active participant."

This is the subtle, implicit tragedy of all of Walser's characters. They go out into the world with ebullience and open hearts, but fail to connect with other people on a significant level. Even in the story "Adventure on

a Train," wherein the narrator and a woman have an anonymous sexual encounter on a train, the woman is never named. She isn't given any dialogue other than an innocuous greeting. She merely drifts into the narrator's world, a compartment where he sits "like a contemplative hermit in his silent, secluded cloister," they have their encounter, and she disembarks, drifting out of his life as effortlessly as she enters it.

Playful but stern, comical yet tragic, Robert Walser effortlessly toes the line between happiness and despair. In spite of the disconnect between his characters and the world they surround themselves with, you will walk away from this book grateful for the perspective they have lent you. And that final, corporeal connection is definitive proof of Walser's genius.

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## Lobstergirl says

I had been waiting for a work that would yield up the phrase *mustache eventualities*.

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## jules says

There is something so therapeutic and invigorating in Robert Walser's crisp and light as air prose. Walser has a lot to say about the little things around us, and the results are delightful, demonstrated in this lovely collection of essays depicting the seemingly endless road of life. Time seems to slow down as you immerse yourself in the mastery of his writing, and in the chaos of the mind, this book is an oasis that I'd drowned my soul into and found myself again. There is something *more*, sinister even, that looms beneath the grace with which Walser pens his tales, which fascinates me all the more that such beautiful things can come out of the dark, tethered depths of one's soul. He strikes a perfect balance between happiness and despair, and I'm so very glad to have come across such a transcendent piece of work.

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## Kris says

Reading Robert Walser can be a dizzying experience. The Swiss writer, who was born in 1878 in Bern and died on Christmas day, 1956 in Herisau, Switzerland, lived through a period of intense social, cultural, and political change, during which traditional ways of life in Europe began to give way to modernism, provincialism was increasingly at odds with the development of urban cultures, and respect for authority and obedience gained a sinister aspect. In a series of brilliant novels and short prose pieces, Walser leaves behind a body of work formed in the crucible of these changes. His voice is singular, his style immediately identifiable to anyone who has read even one of his works.

Although Walser lived for decades at the end of his life in asylums, withdrawn from the world, in his earlier life he lived right at the fault lines of these changes. He served as an apprentice in a bank and later left that safe existence to live as a wandering writer. He experienced life as a successful writer in Berlin, but later left the flurry of urban life behind him, secluding himself and writing a string of novels, one of which, Jakob von Gunten, remains the best starting point to explore his work. In 1913, Walser left Berlin to return to a quiet provincial life in Switzerland. He continued to write briefly, but he had difficulty adjusting to cultural and social changes which were accelerating after World War I. Although he continued to write sporadically, his transient lifestyle and inability to find the equilibrium to carve out a life for himself led him to be committed to a sanatorium in Waldau. He was transferred from Waldau to another asylum in Herisau in 1933, where he

lived until his death. (See the wonderful review by J.M. Coetzee, "The Genius of Robert Walser" in the New York Review of Books for more details about his life and work: <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archi...>)

NYRB has played an instrumental role in the Walser renaissance, which continues in their upcoming release of this collection, *A Schoolboy's Diary and Other Stories* (release date September 3, 2013). In it, editor and translator Damion Searls brings together short prose pieces and stories that cover most of Walser's writing career. Some pieces are short sketches. Others are stories. And some are written in the form of brief essays by schoolboys. The selections are well-chosen, and provide an extraordinary perspective on some of the elements that make Walser a unique, important, and beloved writer.

Some of the elements of Walser's style and approach that I appreciate the most are visible in this collection. One of his favorite themes is that of unquestioning obedience by schoolboys and apprentices. In a pure, simple style Walser shows through sudden mood swings and contradictory assertions the irrationality of an authoritarian social and educational system. In the schoolboy essays of Fritz Kocher, Walser gives full, and often humorous, voice to a cultural system that celebrates obedience and punishment. In the essay "Poverty," Kocher writes: *"Someone is poor when he comes to school in a torn jacket. Who would deny that? We have several poor boys in our class. They wear tattered clothes, their hands freeze, they have unbeautiful dirty faces and unclean behavior. The teacher treats them more roughly than us, and he is right to. Teachers know what they're doing."* In the essay "Man," Kocher follows a stream of consciousness trail that leads him to ask to be punished: *"Secretly, I love art. But it's not a secret anymore, not since right now, because now I've been careless and blabbed it. Let me be punished for that and made an example of."* In the essay "School," Kocher abrogates all responsibility for certain topics to authority figures:

*"In fact I'm surprised we were even given this topic at all. Schoolboys cannot actually talk about the value of school and need for school when they're still stuck in it themselves. Older people should write about things like that. The teacher himself, for instance, or my father, who I think is a wise man. The present time, surrounding you, singling and making noise, cannot be put down in writing in any satisfactory way. You can blabber all kinds of nonsense, but it's a real question whether the mishmash you write (I allow myself the bad manners of describing my work in this way) actually says and means anything. I like school. Anything forced on me, whose necessity has been mutely insisted upon by every side, I try to approach obligingly, and like it. School is the unavoidable choker around the neck of youth, and I confess that it is a valuable piece of jewelry indeed!"*

In addition to his focus on obedience, Walser also writes beautiful prose describing country scenes, some of which seem to relate to a fairy tale past that is more and more difficult to see with the onset of modernity and urbanization. In "Ascent by Night" (1914), Walser writes: *"I was taking the train through the mountains. It was twilight and the sun was so beautiful. The mountains seemed so big and so powerful to me, and they were too. Hills and valleys make a country rich and great, they win it space. The mountainous nature struck me as extravagant, with its towering rock formations and beautiful dark forests soaring upward. I saw the narrow paths snaking around the mountains, so graceful, so rich in poetry. The sky was clear and high, and men and women were walking along the paths. The houses sat so still, so lovely, on the hillsides. The whole thing seemed to me like a poem, a majestic old poem, passed down to posterity eternally new."* As he continues on foot, the narrator keeps banging his head on trees in the dark forest, but he laughs at the pain.

In the story "Hans" (1919), Walser conveys the clash between the freedom of a wandering life, and the looming call of Duty in the form of military service. Hans has lived the free life of a wanderer, rambling through the countryside, in his view living just as well as a baron because he can swim, he can walk where he chooses, he has the freedom to enjoy the beauty of nature and the goodness of others. Hans' response to a military mobilization represents, in a few short paragraphs, the profound ways that world War I transformed life in Central Europe. The story is beautifully written, with a jarring ending that brings home the irreversible changes of life in Europe after WWI.

For the quality of the writing, the temporal scope of the pieces, and the themes it presents, this collection is highly recommended to fans of Robert Walser, new and old alike.

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## Samadrita says

Faced with the prospect of reviewing a collection of short stories, which is probably my least favorite writing chore ever, I am choosing the easy way out. I am so taken with the tranquil, understated beauty of Walser's writing that I am most unwilling to disassemble his short stories into separate assessing criteria like style, essence, prose, theme, imagery and so on.

So what I'll do is convince you, dear uninitiated reader, to pick up this little gem, flip through its pages and discover for yourself the treasures embedded within without trying your patience by going into excruciating detail. And I'll let Walser speak on my behalf.

The initial few short stories are written from the point of view of a school boy in the format of short essays on various topics ranging from school, poverty, careers to friendship, politeness, nature and so on.

It is astonishing to note that despite the glaringly trite nature of these subjects, Walser manages to bring something new to the stories by adding a distinct touch of his own. His tone fluctuates between mildly sardonic and wistful to complacent and observant but unassuming.

Sample what he has to say about "School" -

*"School is the unavoidable choker around the neck of youth, and I confess that it is a valuable piece of jewelery indeed. What a burden we would be to our parents, workers, passersby, shop owners, if we didn't have to go to school!"*

And this is what he says about "Politeness"-

*"The more big and important a polite person is, the more benevolence his civility has."*

His astute observations on *anger and conflict* -

*"Not only boys can bear grudges against other boys in such a way, so too just as well can grownups against grownups, mature adults against mature adults, and I would venture to say, nations against nations. A vengeance or revenge can collect in the heart of a nation due to self-regard that has been injured in various ways, and it grows and grows, without end, becomes more and more pressing, more and more painful rises up like a high mountain no longer to be cleared away, obstructs any mutual understanding, inhibits warm, healthy, reasonable reciprocal communication, turns into twitching nervous fury, and is so tyrannical and degrading that it can one day no longer be reined in and cries out wildly for bloody conflict."*

There are references to nature, changing seasons and vivid descriptions of lush, green landscapes in the Swiss countryside aplenty.

*"Autumn was beautiful, with its brownish melancholy that seemed attractive and happily right to me, while in May the blossoming trees and all the singing and wonderful smells plunged into sadness."*

The short stories included in the latter half of the book seem to be written from different perspectives like that of modest young men about to enlist in the army or confused, lost writers trying to seek validation in a life fraught with failures and rejections. (This is vaguely autobiographical I believe.)

*"Restlessness, uncertainty, and a premonition of a singular fate may have been what led me, in my sequestered isolation, to pick up my quill and attempt to create a reflection of myself."*

Here are a few of his excellent ruminations on reading -

*"A book bewitches and dominates us, it holds us spellbound, in other words it exerts a power over us, and we are happy to let such tyranny occur, for it is a blessing. Anyone captivated and gripped by a book for a given time does not use that time to initiate gossip about his dear fellow man, which is always a great and crude mistake."*

And ahem, book snobs please do take note of the following-

*"I have sometimes heard people talk about so-called harmful reading, e.g., infamous Gothic novels. That's another story we shall avoid getting into but we can say this much: the worst book in the world is not as bad as the complete indifference of never picking up a book at all. A trashy book is not nearly as dangerous as people sometimes think, and the so-called really good books are under certain conditions by no means as free of danger as people generally like to believe. Intellectual things are never as harmless as eating chocolate or enjoying an apple tart or the like. In principle, the reader just has to know how to cleanly separate reading from life."*

Walser's short sentences gave me the impression of beads of morning dew collecting on blades of grass, the evanescent beauty of which evaporates away before we even have time enough to bask in its resplendence. But for as long as the novelty lasts, it is the most exquisite thing in the world. He is not overly pedantic yet his writing reflects his keen understanding of nearly every topic under the sun and exudes immense charm and clarity.

*"But soon enough he was cheerful again. Love of humanity and the sorrows thereof, a lust for life and the pain therefrom, rose exquisitely up like tall ghostly shapes in the pale, golden air of the summer evening. Softly the figures seemed to wave to him."*

To conclude, this is a thoroughly delightful collection but I'll hold out on that 5-star rating until I read a full-fledged novel of his.

*\*\*A big thank you to netgalley for the digital ARC\*\**

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## **Guttersnipe Das says**

To pretend that I am a sedate and demure fan of Robert Walser, in hopes of thereby seeming reasonable, would be misleading to the point of dishonesty. Robert Walser is my very favorite writer (indeed, a word like master or guide seems more appropriate) and I should admit up front that my opinions are those of a fanatic. Although Robert Walser remains under-appreciated, there is also a growing group of Walser devotees who seek out everything available. Some of these ardent fans seek, as I do, to create new work informed and

inspired by Walser.

Unsurprisingly, I've sought out everything by Walser that is available in translation and I feel strenuously grateful to NYRB for this new series of thematic collections of Walser's short prose. ("Berlin Stories" translated by Susan Bernofsky is another delightful book, and I hope ardently that there are more to come.)

Still, as years pass, and collections appear, I begin to worry that new collections of short pieces from Walser's vast un-translated work will begin to seem "picked over", just gleanings or scraps. Although it is true, as Walser writes, that "Enthusiasts are happy with little, in fact often extremely miniscule things" (163), I came to this book hoping that truly beautiful and first-rate work is yet to appear.

In this hope, I was not disappointed. Above all, what "A Schoolboy's Diary" makes clear is that Walser's trove of un-translated work is nowhere near to being picked over. The stories here are as necessary and enchanting as those to be found in any of the 5 collections of short prose currently available. (Fellow Walserians, please correct me if I have miscounted.)

Although I think readers new to Walser would do well to begin with a "general" collection of the short prose such as "Selected Stories", translated by Christopher Middleton, or "Masquerade", translated by Susan Bernofsky, these thematic collections are a great pleasure and you would not be wrong to start your exploration of Robert Walser right here.

Fanatics tend to disapprove of innovations and new arrivals. I admit that I questioned, as I picked up this book, whether Damion Searls could possibly be as worthy a translator as Middleton and Bernofsky, to whom readers of Walser in English are wholly indebted. ("Some young upstart", I assumed. Totally wrong. Although his appearance is youthful, he has an august list of translation credits a mile long.)

Though I came to this book armed and ready to disapprove, I found myself unable to - these are beautiful and flowing translations, like one of the sparkling lakes or streams that Walser often seems to be ambling alongside.

As usual, I read aloud and copied out passages that enchanted me. How is it possible to resist a writer who announces, "To give you an opportunity to see me would mean introducing you to a person who cuts off half the rim of his felt hat with scissors to give it a wilder, more bohemian appearance. Is that the kind of strange being you really want to have before you?"(51)

At a time when most people seem to consider themselves so terribly important, I think Walser's sauntering humility has a special resonance. How good it is to be reminded, "Tact and discretion are never anything over than attractive. Modestly stepping aside can never be recommended as a continual practice in strong enough terms." (161) Or simply: "Envy is a form of insanity." (53)

Pieces like "From My Youth" made me feel that I could see and understand Walser more directly than I had before. "Early spring was magnificent. All the houses, trees and streets gleamed as though they had come from some higher state of being. It was half dream, half fever. I was never sick, just always strangely and seriously infected with a longing for extraordinary things." (124)

As someone who seeks to emulate Walser, I endlessly compose short pieces, endlessly send them out, and endlessly receive friendly and baffled rejection notes. Admittedly, I often suspect that my uselessness as a human being is unsurpassed. How imperative therefore to read "The Last Prose Piece", in which Walser warns me against his profession in the strongest possible terms. How wrenching to find that Walser felt as discouraged as I feel as he endlessly wrote and submitted work -- indeed he writes, "The extent of my submissions will probably never be matched." (146) May these reminders of work and suffering banish my squirrely self-pity.

Above all, it is painful to read Walser's repeated desire to simply give up - though of course he cannot and will not, not until he enters the last sanatorium in 1933. "At last I have drawn a firm line under the truly astoundingly great column of figures and am done with pursuing that for which I am not sufficiently intelligent" (149).

What I would give for a time machine, so that I might rush back in time and encourage him. I'd also like to buy him a new hat.

Old and new fans of Robert Walser will revel in this book. As Walser reminds us, "When you are faced with a happiness that is not forbidden, you must seize and enjoy it." (177)

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## Jesse says

Reading this I was reminded of Michael Haneke's *The White Ribbon*, which imagined the routine complacency of early century Germany preparing the soil for the grotesque bumper crop of Nazism, sinister children reared by mediocre, crushingly normal adults. Here, in a set of story shards clustered around the traumatic chasm of WWI, Walser offers a more mature analysis, albeit one never intended to explicate how rule-abiding, comfort-loving people and their cozy village lives laid the groundwork for the century's biggest calamity. As it stands, a journey into the heart of the ordinary early-century German, which explains the persistent focus on schoolwork, the molding of children's minds as the key to the foundational essence Walser is attempting to explore. Doesn't fully come together until the last story, which reveals the full measure of what's going on here.

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## Nicholas During says

I was kind of over the whole Walser thing, sometimes it seems like every single written bone has been picked over with some of these writers, like Bolano. But instead I immediately fell comfortable back into Walser's unique charm. "Fritz Kocher's Diary," which starts off the collection and is a very early piece I think, is Walser at his best. The young Fritz Kocher—young, innocent, rebellious, eager, sensitive, clever and outgoing—is the typical Walser hero, seen in Jakob von Junten. And his little schoolwork essays are similar to the character, their naïveté is suspect but honest at the same time, the perceptions astute with all the hallmarks of the innocent speaker, the writing funny and digressive. It's always hard to tell how much we are meant to fall into the Walser mindset, and that is half the fun and no doubt why is so popular. All the essays are directed at the grading teacher, who is both learning what happens in his classroom from a different angle, witnessing an affront on his authority, and receiving a tribute from a talented and admiring friend. This relationship, I think, is meant to bring us to question the usual relationship that a reader has with both an author and protagonist. And of course Fritz's wisdom is perceptive, hilarious, creative and original.

The rest of the stories in the collection play often play on the same theme. But there is also the wonderful Walser descriptive vignettes of city life, country life, student life, young artist struggling in the world, and the basic motions of daily life. Walser does this as well as anyone. His enthusiasm over nature transports to the read (at least this one). His observations of the difficulties, joys, and strangeness of living in a big city surrounded by nameless people is too. One can't help but smile while reading these stories, and appreciating all around more.

There are also some pretty weird First World War stories, which are similar to *The Magic Mountain* in a way in their complete (and intentional?) misunderstanding of what is happening. If I have one complaint it's that

the collection is a bit too long. Which I think is caused by the fact that each, very often only one page, story or essay is so packed with fun and wonder and wit and cleverness that it can be too much to read so many together. But do read through, because although the first pieces feel stronger, there are some mini-masterpieces all the way through.

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