



A Small Circus

Hans Fallada , Michael Hofmann (Translator)

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It is summer, 1929, and in a small German town a storm is brewing. The shabby reporter Tredup leads a precarious existence working for the Pomeranian Chronicle - until he takes some photographs that offer the chance to make a fortune. In Kruger's bar, the farmers are plotting their revenge on greedy officials. A mysterious travelling salesman from Berlin, Henning, is stirring up trouble - but no one knows why. Meanwhile the Nazis grow stronger and the Communists fight them in the streets. And at the centre of it all, the Mayor, 'Fatty' Gareis, seeks the easy life even as events spiral beyond his control. As tensions erupt between workers and bosses, town and country, Left and Right, alliances are broken, bribes are taken and plots are hatched, until the tension spills over into violence.

Hans Fallada's raw, darkly humorous account of a town rife with corruption, greed and brutality, first published in 1931, was written as Weimar Germany collapsed around him. It is an extraordinary novel about the failure of governments and the failings of people. Michael Hofmann's brilliant, colloquial translation brings this work of intrigue and foreboding to English readers for the first time.

A Small Circus Details

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From Reader Review A Small Circus for online ebook

Danny Marcalo says

Ich bin ein grosser Fallada-Bewunderer, aber das ist der erste Roman, der mir nicht gefallen hat. Es gibt meiner Meinung nach viel zu viele Charaktere, ein Ausmass, dass ich die nahezu nicht auseinanderhalten konnte. Die Geschichte die erzahlt wird ist leider in meinen Augen ein bisschen langweilig und in der Version, die ich gelesen habe, 654 Seiten, viel zu lang. Was man in diesem fruehren Fallada schon findet sind diese Figuren, die staendig ihr Recht fordern, dabei aber plump und undifferenziert sind. Bekommen die was sie wollen, treten sie nach, bekommen sie es nicht, sind sie weinerlich. Sie sind Prinzipienreiter und ziehen sich auf Regeln, Gesetze und gesellschaftliche Normen zurueck. Dennoch versuchen sie mit aller Macht diese zu durchbrechen. Solche Figuren findet man in diesem Roman, aber auch in anderen Falladas. Ich frage mich, was das ueber das Deutschland der 20er bis 40er Jahre aussagt. Die Figuren scheinen gar keine hoeheren Ideale mehr zu haben, sondern nur noch an sich selbst zu denken. Vielleicht ist das eine Folge der schlechten wirtschaftlichen Lage, Fallada hat es ja selbst mitgemacht.

Phil says

This novel is set in Altholm, Pomerania, Weimar republic (Pomerania is now split between Poland and Germany) in 1929 the title comes from the prologue where as the visiting circus refused to buy as space in the Altholm chronicle calling it a "fish and chip paper", the newspaper publishes a scathing review calling it a small circus.

The rest of the novel, the circus is not i it in a real sense but a metaphorical sense. The narrative structure is a third person and there is no focal point of a character with various characters in the novel being important. There is the mayor Gareis (though the translation of mayor may be a bit disconcerting as there is also the position of Lord Mayor in the small town). The press is a main focal point too with the Altholm Chronicle editor Stuff and advertising manager Tredup also featuring strongly. We then also the farmers, who form the main crux of the events that spiral in the storyline as two Revenue bailiffs go to confiscate oxen from a farmer who had a crazy estimated tax bill levied against the farmer. (Considering how the topic of the novel comes from a Revenue bill, could I claim the time spent reading it as part of a Continual Professional Development time needed for my annual return? *ponders*)

The novel is split into three section, the first entitled "the farmers", the second "the townies" and the last section is called "judgement day". There is really no character that comes out of the novel looking good but this isn't a bad thing. In the portrayal of the characters there is a darki comedic force (I burst out laughing at a couple of things in it)

Fallada was looking at making the going on of the small town in question, based on his own experience as a journalist in the region to be the circus that it was, encapsulating the last days of the Weimar Republic. If it was a new novel now, I'd probably be criticising it for being just based on the benefit of hindsight on the crumbings of the Weimar Republic. Being as it is from around the time it was written, it seems very prescient in the portrayal of the Weimar Republic.

This is not the best book ever written but it is a very good book. Fallada has a great ear for dialogue and this book is very big on dialogue, maybe if Fallada was alive today, he might have been a script writer instead as his novel do tend to be dialogue hevy (though that is only based on reading 2 of his other novels, one which was specifically made for the intention of making a film of it)

Brandon Prince says

Political satire of the highest caliber. In its treatment of small town rivalries and cynical opportunistic journalism, the book is on par with, if not superior to, Hammett's Red Harvest/Kurosawa's Yojimbo and Wilder's Ace In The Hole.

John says

Great book (fiction, what a find, of a proliferate writer of his time. A cast of characters of a smallish town in Germany before the Nazis' took over. Allow yourself time in the beginning of the book, for the characters to manifest themselves into the thick of a screwy time in the late 1920's in North-eastern Germany...

NOTE: (Translated from German to English(not American English) but very readable.

Zelmer Wilson says

Over the last year, I have become a big fan of Hans Fallada, a German writer. This was his third novel and the first one that was successful. Having read a few of his other novels, (Like Little Man, What Now?, Wolf Among Wolves, The Drinker & Every Man Dies Alone), I was expecting to enjoy this one. And for the most part, I did. There are no heroes in this story, unlike some of his other novels and there isn't any strong female characters. It is because of this and because there too many characters to keep track (there's a list before the prologue), I can't give it five stars.

This novel is entertaining and educational. It provides a picture of a small German town during the Twenties. And since it was written during this time and by a native, the reader will learn a lot about life in pre-Nazi Germany. Some of the phrasing is unusual and it is dated in some ways, but still a very enjoyable read.

Don says

Small town/village existence in Germany of the early 1930s, with all the Country's various political factions mistrusting each other and the back stabbing that results throughout the story among the various characters.

Quite an interesting read considering how long ago this story was actually written.

My thanks to the Author, the Publishing House, and Goodreads for making it possible for me to freely view and review this excellent fictional novel of a Germany before Hitler rose to complete power and started WWII by invading Poland in the quest of world dominance.

Jason says

A piercing and caustic mosaic of greed and treachery at the heart of the Weimar Republic, lambasting both the left and the right, and predicting Germany's transformation into National Socialist nightmare, A Small

Circus is a pretty impressive debut novel and deserves to be considered a classic of world literature. All of the characters are corrupt. Much schnapps and beer is drunk while duplicities and double-crosses are nursed and hatched. Everybody in one way or another gets their just desserts (except for the wife of Tredup, a conniving advertising manager, photographer and aspiring editor; she just gets liberally shat upon for no good reason). A farmer's uprising (based on real events in the town of Neumünster, called Altholm in the novel) which turns in to a clash between peasants and police leads to a judicial nightmare and a whirligig of reprisals and dire repercussions. A letter, pace the old psychoanalytic epigram, always arrives at its destination. The way information is circulated and compromised in a relatively small community is perfectly depicted. Various narrative elisions are filled in by information being arrived at circuitously before we know anything about it. How information is exercised, controlled, and made to sneak in through the back door is the real subject of the book. What is ultimately on display is a small corner of a dying republic and the locally symptomatological manifestation of a national infirmity.

Paul says

This novel was hell to read. Fallada's writing style, dialogue-led, featuring dozens of characters, results in a distracting text that frequently confuses and gets in the way of the plot. So many things about this book irritated me almost to the point of abandoning it - the use of present tense throughout, the cringeworthy and awkward colloquialisms (more a translation issue) that really grated, such as "proper night's kip", "probs" and "none of my beeswax". The plot itself is drawn out and confused. Letters are stolen and published to great uproar, but it is often not clearly explained what information they contain and why they are so important. People suddenly get irate at each other for reasons that are never really apparent. It's some thing writing a novel full of intrigue and duplicitous characters, but when your novel contains over seventy main characters, it all gets a bit bewildering. I think I only knew what was actually going on approximately 60% of the time.

Still, this book evades a one-star rating, because for all its faults, it was quite a fascinating portrayal of Weimar society, really bringing to life a time that I only learned about in history class. Interestingly, there's a lot I recognised in that society: political disaffection, clashes between police and protestors, a split proletariat at each other's throats, and a deep, simmering righteous anger that never gets a satisfying outlet. The dark comedy was for me underscored by the spectre of the country that Germany was to become just a few years later. It was for this that I persisted, and I'm glad I stuck it out to the end. I hear from reviewers and a friend that Fallada's later novels are much better, so I will try 'Alone in Berlin' one time.

Sverre says

This was Fallada's first major work, submitted to the publisher in 1930. Had I not read two of Fallada's later excellent works (*Every Man Dies Alone* and *Little Man What Now?*) I would not have bought this confusing, ponderous, bloated, provincial novel. If it had not been for the *Dramatis Personae* included by the translator Michael Hoffman, I would not have gotten far in this almost six hundred page book. The *Dramatis Personae* lists some seventy characters who contribute to swell the narrative until it reaches a long anticipated but unimpressive conclusion—about twenty of them with major roles, another twenty-five with major supportive roles, the remaining twenty-five with minor contributing roles. The interweaving plot unfolds painfully for the unfortunate reader. I would rate this book one star as far as the reading "pleasure" it provides.

However, as a study of rural and small town German life in the late 1920s, it is an excellent work describing

the divisive nature of the social fabric and deserves four stars for that aspect. There are hostilities between rural and urban populations, peasants and business people, civil servants and journalists, and local and national authorities. The fractionalization of society is compounded by at least twenty contending political parties. The greed, the administrative ineptness and the colossal burden of the reparation payments doomed the Weimar Republic. The Nazi Party arose as a fiercely nationalistic movement which--unfortunately as fate would have it--was seized on as a solution by a major portion of the German population.

The style of writing deserves comment. About two thirds of the book consists of dialogue, often between numbers of interacting characters. Many readers will find the magnitude of this quirky literal idiosyncrasy disruptive and distracting. Others may enjoy the substratum of personal motives the dialogue discloses. Readers have to stay alert and constantly remind themselves of who the characters are. It can be a cerebral challenge.

There is strong character development and exposure of the following roles: Hermann Stuff, the do-everything schemer and conservative editor of a small newspaper, *The Chronicle*; Max Tredup, co-employee of Stuff, a bungling aspiring co-conspirator of more than one faction; "Fatty" or "Red" Gareis, the autocratic socialist Mayor of Altholm, who makes the decision that affects the main plot and influences most subplots of this novel; Frerksen, Gareis' assistant, his Police Commander who becomes ostracized by the farmers for his brutal handling of their "peaceful" demonstration; Franz Manzow, city council member, businessman, would-be conciliator and sexual predator of little girls; Franz Reimers, leader of the farmers' Bauernschaft movement and staunch Headman of Gramzow; Albin Banz, dirt farmer and victim of the violence perpetrated by Frerksen, becomes a mentally deranged murderer; and Georg Henning, travelling salesman, ardent chief activist and flag-bearer for the peasant farmers. This is an impressive cast for readers who enjoy a plethora of idiosyncratic characters. But does it make enjoyable reading? For me: NOT, but three stars for this aspect of the novel.

Overall I can only rate this work two stars because of its frustration factors. I think this book's ponderousness is an exception among Fallada's works. I have two more of his books unread on the shelf and I believe I will enjoy them.

Kirk Houghton says

There are many reason why the Weimar Republic is one of the most studied and debated periods in the annals of modern German history. As the epoch that followed the fall of the Kaiserreich and preceded the emergence of Hitler, Germany's brief experiment with democracy was loathed by millions; even those that persisted were never more than a lukewarm combination of moderate Social Democrats, Catholics and petit-bourgeois business leaders. A granite foundation for upholding the rule of law didn't stand a chance in this era of hyperinflation, austerity and global economic chaos.

The continuing fascination of this age is also one of the reasons why Hans Fallada's novels have taken on a new importance outside his home country. Though Thomas Mann, Hermann Hesse and most of Germany's great writers went into exile in the 1930s, Fallada stayed behind while Goebbels' Ministry of Propaganda and Enlightenment tightened its grip on the arts. Yet the poor English translations of his works were almost as detrimental as the Third Reich's demand for conformity, and it's only the last decade that's seen a surge in new activity from scholars and admirers outraged by Fallada's lack of universal appreciation amongst the pantheon of literary legends. So where does *A Small Circus* fit into his back catalogue of re-discovered gems?

First of all, those looking for the quintessential chronicle of the age should read his 1938 novel, *Iron Gustav*. Nonetheless, *A Small Circus* should not be dismissed out of hand, either. Yes, it may be one of Fallada's lesser known works, but his poignant wit, detached sense-of-humour and trademark portrayal of 'the little

man' are all present here along with his remarkable ability to re-create the absurd Captain of Köpenick-type incidents that once saw a German shoemaker don a military uniform and fool an entire town into following his orders to arrest the local Mayor. (This 1906 event also did the rounds in the English press as a typical example of blind German obedience to men in military uniform.)

On this occasion Fallada's prized charlatan is a young Berlin salesman who latches onto a small-time peasant march and sees his opportunity for fame and acclamation in provincial Pomerania. But when the demonstration gets out of hand a whole cast of mendacious journalists, conspiratorial politicians, restless businessmen and disorganised farmers clash in a low-stakes recrimination of parochial proportions. Berlin and the crumbling Reichstag of the Weimar Republic might as well be another country to the town's inhabitants. There is a district where live-changing events threaten but never materialise. Think of Ibsen's *Enemy of the People*, where town hall politics consume the self-important chattering classes and doyens of civic society, but go unnoticed in the wider world.

Characters like Mayor Gareis, the alcoholic journalist, Herr Stuff, and the peasant leader, Franz Reimers, are reminiscent of Emile Zola's finest creations. Yet the large *Dramatis Personae* may be a bit overwhelming, and the dominance of character dialogue is even more unusual as a method of plot development. But it works. Before you know it you've read through 572 pages and experienced the ups and downs of Fallada's protagonists as if every ego and ambition is your own. That's an impressive achievement for such an unorthodox approach to a novel.

There's also a sense that Fallada wrote *A Small Circus* with a film adaptation in mind. Each chapter transports you to the spectator's armchair; imagine reading something that invokes the most dramatic moments in classic film. Few authors can do this, especially those that are economical with environmental settings and long on character dialogue. No wonder Fallada's works are being re-appraised. Could anyone else pull this off?

Of course, it's impossible to avoid hindsight and historical knowledge when reading anything from this period. Though Hitler and the Nazis get no more than the occasional mention as one of many factions vying for dominance of the German state, it's too much to say *A Small Circus* is a far-sighted chronicle of a society breaking apart. Nothing in these pages suggest the Weimar Republic's demise is inevitable or imminent – that's something other reviewers have foisted on the book by reading back into history.

What you have here is the gripping town story, where the alehouses are full of cynical hacks and over-taxed farmers; where blackmail, infanticide, paedophilia and wife-beating bubble below the surface; and where Malthusian burdens force families to adapt and survive with admirable fortitude. It doesn't matter whether this is Germany or Greenland – these tensions are omnipresent in the best literature, and *A Small Circus* is no exception.

Charles Lewis says

I have a thing for German fiction. Especially those stories that take place in the 1920s and 1930s. I have read many great books of this era. I am happy to say "A Small Circus" is one of the best. I'd give it six stars if I could. A short description. A small town in Germany circa 1928. The life of the town is disrupted by a demonstration of local farmers that goes wrong. That doesn't sound like much but trust me it is. I've read other Fallada books (my other favourite is *Every Man Dies Alone*) but this one stands out for having so many tightly drawn characters. If this was a movie it would be an epic.

Cooper Renner says

Perhaps not quite the masterwork that *Every Man Dies Alone* or *Little Man, What Now?* is, this is still a remarkable achievement--a stunningly in-depth, detailed depiction of the political and social machinations before, after and during a farmers' march in a small German city 85 years ago: huge cast of characters, reporters, politicians, police, farmers, businessmen. An amazing look at the chaos in Germany just before the Nazi takeover.

Tony says

Hans Fallada is a writer that deserves considerably more attention. It's a crime that more of his books aren't stocked as standard in the larger book shops to allow more to get to know his works.

Fallada was a man whose life story in itself - run over by a horse and cart then kicked in the face by the horse, suffering typhoid, drug addiction, depression, suicide attempts and a bungled suicide pact that saw him kill his friend and damn near kill himself and commence many stays in mental institutions - is the stuff of a novel in itself. Especially when placed amidst the rise of the Nazis and the lengths the writer was forced to go to in an effort to beat their censor and achieve publishing.

A Small Circus is typical of Fallada's style - objective, fact-driven and almost journalistic in its reporting of events. However, he manages to create characters of intrigue and plot twists aplenty. Some have criticized just how many characters are involved in this book but given the storyline it would be impossible to give such a well-rounded delivery if he didn't. The amount of characters and detail never becomes overpowering and there is no let-up from the momentum of the story. A truly great read.

solitaryfossil says

In the last two years I've become interested in the years between the World Wars - fiction and nonfiction, especially the Weimar Republic era. The setting, a rural area and not being in Berlin, made me eager to read this book.

First the good: I really liked Fallada's writing style - rapid-fire storytelling, often driven by quick and energetic dialog that forced me to concentrate to "keep up." I liked that. The descriptions of the town, its people and their relationships and conflicts were also well-written and engaging. I have a few other Fallada novels on my list, and I will give them a read.

The not-so-good: The first 50% of the book was tight and exciting, with a good building of the coming conflict within the town. But the almost overwhelming number of main and secondary characters (the *Dramatis Personae* did help!), and the many sub-plots and little intrigues got to be a bit much during the book's second half. And the conclusion - after so much conniving, chicanery and double-crossing within the community - was a bit of a fizzle, flat and disappointing. At almost 600 pages, it seemed bloated, and maybe 100-150 pages too long.

Christine Lapping says

I had really enjoyed *Alone in Berlin* but found this one hard going. There were so many different groups and without background knowledge in the politics of 1930s Germany it is hard to understand what is going on

and why.
