

Crabwalk by Günter Grass. Translated by Krishna Winston.
Faber 2003.

Günter Grass, one of the world's greatest living novelists, has produced in Crabwalk a hauntingly powerful novel. Though set in modern Germany, the novel has at its heart the story of a luxury liner, the Wilhelm Gustloff, sunk by a Soviet submarine in the closing months of the Second World war, and packed to the gunwales with German refugees and a few soldiers fleeing the Red Army's inexorable advance on Berlin.

The saga of the ship is interwoven with the lives of three generations of one family, for whom the Wilhelm Gustloff played a defining role.

This is Grass at his best, grappling with the long shadow of Germany's Nazi past and its continuing effect on contemporary German lives; it is also a commentary on the insidious combination of right-wing politics and the internet, as well as abiding German anti-Semitism.

All of the characters are victims, incapable of escaping pre-programmed lives, inhabiting a bleak and troubled world. Crabwalk is a further reminder of how richly deserved was the Nobel Prize for Literature awarded to Grass in 2000, as well as being a powerful commentary on aspects of modern German life.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh