

Hans Fallada's Anti-Fascist Fiction

Germany's lost Literary Genius Rediscovered

By Jonah Raskin

In *The Diary of a Young Girl* – one of the most touching books about fascism ever written – the Dutch teenager, Anne Frank, observed, “Extraordinary things happen to people who go into hiding.” Published in 1947 with an introduction by Eleanor Roosevelt, Frank’s diary awakened the world to the daily lives of Jews hoping to escape concentration camps and gas ovens. Frank’s story was sentimentalized on stage and in the Hollywood movie, but the book itself resonated – it still does – with gritty realism and the kinds of details that just won’t die.

That same year, 1947, saw the publication of *Every Man Dies Alone*, the last novel to be written by Hans Fallada, the lost man of 20th-century Germany literature. Like Frank’s *Diary*, Fallada’s *Every Man* alerted readers around the world to the corrosive force of fascism and the extraordinary things that happen to people in hiding. The main characters aren’t Jews; they aren’t religious nor do they spout Marx, Engels, and Rosa Luxemburg. *Every Man* presents a series of interwoven narratives about fascism that don’t echo the dominant stories that have been told and retold since the end of World War II.

Fallada’s narratives are, however, no less insightful about the society he wrestled with his whole life. Indeed, after all these years, his novels might well be more needed than ever before to remind readers of the unglamorous side of resistance to fascism and to the fact that fascism poisoned everyone’s life, contaminating an entire society. *Every Man Dies Alone*, its author, Hans Fallada, and his other books are long overdue for rediscovery.

Born Rudolf Wilhelm Friedrich Ditzen, Fallada was a best-selling novelist in his own time, though now he’s not nearly as well known as Thomas Mann, Bertolt Brecht, Alfred Döblin, and Herman Hesse all of whom wrote in German and all of whom were translated into dozens of languages. In part, Fallada never attained the international acclaim of Brecht or Mann because his life was far more checkered and far less admirable than theirs. In the eyes of the fascist government, he was a degenerate, though he was also an artist, an intellectual and a humanist. A long-time drug addict, and a criminal – an embezzler and a thief – Fallada served seven-and-a-half-years in

prisons and in mental hospitals afflicted with genuine psychological issues and substance abuse problems. Unlike Mann, Brecht, Doblin, and others, he was a thoroughgoing misfit, nonconformist, and outsider despite the fact that he also identified himself totally as a German citizen.

"I cannot, like other heroes, go abroad and produce literature there," he explained. "I'm so rooted in Germany that I cannot imagine being able to write anywhere else." On another occasion, he observed, "I am a German and I prefer to go under with this accursed and blessed nation than enjoy an illusory happiness in a foreign country." Fallada lived in Germany and wrote in German all through the rise and the fall of the Third Reich.

His best novel, *Wolf Among Wolves*, first appeared in 1937 when fascism already was well-established in Germany and rapidly expanding across Europe. The 75th anniversary of the publication of *Wolf* provides an occasion to revisit Fallada's classic, to see it alongside his other works, including *Every Man Dies Alone*, and to look at the author's disturbing life. The anniversary also provides an opportunity to ponder the connections between culture and literary creativity on the one hand and fascism and censorship on the other hand. Probably no major Germany writer in the 20th-century was more entangled with fascism than Fallada. Moreover, few if any writers experienced the brutalities of fascism as intensely and directly as he did, and lived to tell the tale.

Four of Fallada's best novels – *Little Man, What Now?*, *Wolf Among Wolves*, *Everyman Dies Alone*, and *The Drinker* - have been recently republished in the United States by Melville House in paperback along with fascinating essays about Fallada, who drew on his own experiences to create his fictional characters. Rudolf Wilhelm Friedrich Ditzen was born in 1893 to a German bourgeois family and took the pen name Hans Fallada in 1919. From an early age, he aimed for literary greatness; his encounters with the law and his imprisonment were punishing, of course, but they also provided him with rich material to write about.

Fallada's third novel, *Kleiner Mann – was nun?*, became an instant best seller in Germany. Translated into English as *Little Man – What Now?*, and a selection of the Book-of-the-Month Club in the U.S., it was also made into a popular Hollywood movie. Eighty years after it was first published, it provides a window on Germany society as it careened toward fascism in the early 1930s. Thomas Mann called it "painfully true to life"; the English novelist, Graham Greene, praised it for its "superb" characters.

Hans Pinneberg is the “little man” or “nobody” referred to in the title. Emma, his wife, is the “little woman,” and Horst - the “Shrimp” - is their child born and reared in a world of unemployment, inflation, and unrest. Emma belongs to the Communist Party; Hans promises to vote Communist but never does. His bourgeois background and white-collar jobs prevent him from affiliating with the left. Meanwhile, his co-workers join the fascists. The Pinnebergs are good people to whom bad things happen. Big men and big, blind social forces push them around.

Fallada describes the Pinneberg’s attempts to create a happy family and stay true to one another, though neither love nor frugality are enough to protect them from economic crisis and a political world spinning out of control. They quickly learn that “everything gets more complicated when you’re poor.” At the end of the novel, Pinneberg hardly recognizes himself as he stands on a street corner and looks at his reflection in a shop window. Surrounded by “well-dressed people, respectable people, people who earned money,” Hans Pinneberg is only “a pale outline without a collar, in a shabby coat.” He grasps the truth: “that he was on the outside now, that he didn’t belong here any more, and that it was perfectly correct to chase him away.” In the last chapter, the author writes that, “Nothing lasted but being alone,”

Wolf Among Wolves, Fallada’s best and most far-reaching work, was published five years after *Little Man – What Now?* It has a large cast of well-drawn, complex characters from all walks of life and a broad social canvas that depicts German society as it disintegrated in the early 1920s. World War I and the Treaty of Versailles provide the historical backdrop. In the last section of the novel, Fallada offers his own fictional version of the failed 1923 putsch that was launched by Hitler and that aimed to topple the Bavarian government. Neither Hitler nor anyone resembling him appears in *Wolf Among Wolves*, but it’s obvious that the clandestine organization and the failed coup that are described in the novel are meant to be a reflection of the historical events that took place in Bavaria. The conspirators are a despicable lot – egoistical, brutal, and sadistic. One of them is “a monster who kills for the sake of killing.”

Fallada composed his 800-page masterpiece in just ten months – from July 1936 to May 1937. “I wrote without looking up, nor did I look round either – neither to the left nor to the right,” he explained. In 1936-1937, there was no other way he could have written his novel and not been overwhelmed by the terrible political events of the time:

the enactment of the Nuremberg laws that deprived Jews of citizenship; the opening of concentration camps; and the invasion and conquest of Europe by German troops. From the first sentence – “A girl and a man were sleeping on a narrow iron bed” - to the last – “Good, good night!” - the novel moves forward relentlessly and deliberately, leaving no corner of the lives of the main characters unexamined.

The title of the book is meant to be both metaphorical and literal. “It was a hungry age, a wolf age,” Fallada writes. Many of the characters are predatory, though not Wolfgang Pagel – the hero of the novel - known as “Wolf” to friends. The son of a successful bourgeois German artist, and a veteran of World War I, Wolf is addicted to gambling. At roulette tables in the demimonde of Berlin, and alongside cocaine addicts and prostitutes, he loses millions of marks. His devoted lover, Petra, is arrested and taken to jail and stills he gambles.

For much of the novel, the reader dismisses Pagel as a scoundrel incapable of taking responsibility for his own actions. Still, he has a remarkable ability to observe, change, and become a *mensch*. “He must become a man before he can be a father,” one character observes of him. In the latter part of the novel, Wolf matures, as does his lover, Petra, who gives birth to their child. The ending is far happier than the ending of *What Now – Little Man?*, and it may be why Joseph Goebbels called it a “a super book” and noted, too, that Fallada had “real talent.” It seems unlikely, however, that Goebbels read all 800-pages carefully; if he did he also might have missed much of its meaning. Under the eyes of the censors, Fallada used irony and ambiguity, metaphor and symbol. Moreover, though the novel includes the 1923 putsch and its conspirators, it also steers clear of overtly ideological issues.

“Am I a reformer? A teacher?” Fallada asked rhetorically in 1937 and answered, “No, I am only a portrayer.” In *Wolf*, there are no characters that are communists or fascists as there are in *Little Man* and yet the novel conveys a powerful sense of the underlying social and economic conditions that led to fascism. There’s so much about money throughout the novel that it would be fair to say that money is one of the main characters. *Wolf* tells the truth about a society that’s determined not to see or tell the truth about itself. Though there are obvious differences between Germany in the 1920s and the United States today, the novel offers parables for our own “wolf age” that seems to be “falling

to pieces” and in which citizens often in denial and, like Wolf, gamble their money in Las Vegas and on the Stock Exchange.

After the publication of *Wolf*, Fallada continued to write, but his books were mostly fairy tales, and harmless stories for children. Fascism forced him to soften his satire and his bitterness and to become more secretive and deceptive. In prison in 1944, he wrote secretly the novel, *The Drinker*, which he smuggled out of prison and that remained unpublished until 1950, three years after his death.

It wasn't until after the end of World War II that Fallada returned to serious fiction openly and publicly. *Every Man Dies Alone* – his last novel - depicts German fascism from the inside and at the height of its madness during World War II. At 500-plus pages, with a large cast of characters and a complex social canvas, *Every Man Dies Alone* has the heft and artistry of *Wolf Among Wolves*. Once again, Fallada focuses on a man and a woman - a married couple, Otto and Anna Quangel - whose son is killed in battle and whose death spurs them to distribute clandestinely anti-war, anti-Nazi propaganda. Their acts of resistance are unsung and often visible only to themselves, the police, and their jailers. Otto is a quiet German Everyman; Anna is a self-effacing German Everywoman. They're precisely the kinds of humane, decent, though non-affiliated human beings that a writer such as Fallada would want to create to launch a new anti-fascist culture after World War II.

The first part of the novel shows how and why the working-class Quangels decide to take a stand against fascism. The second part depicts them engaged in underground activity, while the police work overtime to identify and apprehend them. The third part describes their arrest, imprisonment, trial, torture, and refusal to be humiliated, dehumanized, or destroyed. One of the major characters is a fascist detective assigned to their case.

The Italian writer, Primo Levi, called *Every Man Dies Alone*, “The greatest book ever written about German resistance to the Nazis.” If I had to describe it in a sentence I'd say that it was “the greatest book ever written about the deadly force of fascism.” Fallada shows how the Third Reich operated day-in-and day out, in factories, offices, homes, on farms, and street corners, in police headquarters, and in prisons. *Every Man Dies Alone* offers a searing vision of a society in which the Nazis are master criminals run amuck. Brutally and savagely, they make the most inhumane of laws, carry them out, perverting justice and annihilating everyone in their path. Nobody is

safe, no one sleeps soundly at night, and everyone is under suspicion. Reading the book feels like descending into a prison from which there's no escape – and yet there's still a sense of human decency.

The title of the book, *Every Man Dies Alone*, echoes one of the most powerful lines in *Little Man – What Now?!*: that “nothing lasted but being alone” which captures Fallada's own abiding sense of alienation and his vision of a society in which everyone is trapped in his or her own personal prison cell. The Quangels are akin to Wolfgang Pagel the hero of *Wolf* who learns that it's essential under the most extreme conditions “to be as good and as decent as possible. *Because we are all of one flesh.*” Like him, they aim to do the decent thing.

After World War II, the Soviet authorities made Fallada the mayor of a small town in Germany, and put him in charge of de-Nazification. He seems to have performed his job admirably. He wasn't, however, the sort of comrade to sing the inspiring lines from “The International: “arise ye prisoners of starvation, arise ye wretched of the earth.” Indeed, his novels don't show the wretched of the earth rising up in rebellion. Nor do they have the hope and optimism of the teenager, Anne Frank, who wrote in her *Diary*, “ I think it will all come out right, that this cruelty too will end, and that peace and tranquility will return again.”

Fallada didn't always adopt the habits of Wolfgang Pagel, the hero of *Wolf Among Wolves*, who engages in “independent, persistent brooding” and who also refuses to take “the beaten track.” But he aimed to be true to himself and to his humanist values. In Germany, in the 1930s and 1940s, with many of the best German minds - Brecht, Mann, Hesse, Walter Benjamin, Alfred Doblin, and others - in exile, Fallada was terribly alone and isolated. Out of his own loneliness and independence, he created works of literature that speak eloquently to brooding readers around the world who have nothing to lose but the visible and invisible chains of their own captivity.

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