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## *The Granddaughter: A Novel*

Reviewed by Graham Alexander

**Author:** Bernhard Schlink (Charlotte Collins, trans.)  
**Published By:** HarperVia, 2024  
**Print Pages** 336 pages  
**Reviewer:** Graham Alexander is the pen name of a CIA operations officer. Here he reviews the original German-language version first published in 2021.



Bernhard Schlink, a lawyer, academic, and novelist, uses his latest novel, *The Granddaughter*, to assess the ramifications—cultural, political, and familial—of Germany’s experiences with right- and left-wing authoritarianism during the 20th century, a formula deployed in many other German works, including his own. Throughout the novel, Schlink displays an admirable ability to shape and mold prose on top of a narrative that is uniquely German. Numerous scenes are instantly memorable, not only because Schlink has a knack for crafting dialogue, but because he has the ability to frame thoughts through silence while transmitting to readers a sense of the sights, smells, and sounds that are often indelible atmospheric elements in human interactions.

*The Granddaughter* is a speedy and worthwhile read, especially for those interested in the ramifications of two

failed German police states for the current climate in Germany. Schlink’s work deserves respect for his willingness to explore the idea of how successor generations cope with and interpret the past: a term Germans know as *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. Schlink’s knack for precise prose succeeds in making these complicated questions of morality, guilt, and motive more accessible to readers than authors like Gunter Grass or W.G. Sebald, who have also covered this ground.

Schlink’s own political biases are clear as the novel unfolds and gradually evolves into a parable. He argues between the lines that the ability of the German people to jump out of the long shadow of their 20th-century past hinges upon their willingness to adopt a centrist political ideology linked to Enlightenment values. He is admittedly passionate and eloquent in pushing this argument,

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but his message is bound to land more persuasively on some readers than on others. This understood, *The Granddaughter* succeeds on the same terms as Schlink's first novel to explore this terrain, *The Reader*, in sparking both debate and reflection among readers far beyond the borders of the Federal Republic. Since it was first published in German in 1995, *The Reader* has been published in some 40 languages and won literary awards in numerous countries.

*The Granddaughter* chronicles the experiences of a 70-something German widower named Kaspar, who tries to understand the life experiences and enigmatic behavior of his late, alcoholic wife, Birgit. Living in modern Berlin, Kaspar seeks to complete Birgit's autobiographical novel, which he discovers only after her unexpected death. In the book, Birgit had meditated on her life in East Germany, a life he helped her escape in the 1970s, and the consequences of East Germany's dissolution in 1990. Most poignantly, Kaspar learns that Birgit had given birth to a daughter just before she defected. Birgit's ignorance of the child's fate tormented her silently in the years that followed. Kaspar eventually succeeds in locating the grown daughter, Svenja, and discovers that she is living in a segregated, neo-Nazi community in eastern Germany. He forms an immediate attachment to Svenja's 15 year-old daughter, Sigrun, and persuades both Svenja and her suspicious husband to permit Sigrun to visit him semi-annually in Berlin.

Schlink plays skillfully through this narrative in his descriptions of Kaspar and Birgit. Kaspar is clearly an intelligent, cultured man and a subconscious product of the cosmopolitan, *weltoffen* image that underpinned the Federal Republic since its inception in 1949. Birgit, in contrast, is a product of the authoritarian Marxist Germany into which she was born and matured, even as she formed an identity in silent rebellion against it.

Schlink's own experiences living in a divided Germany help him frame these characters in ways that are convincingly authentic. Kaspar, like many West

Germans, regards Easterners as hopelessly indoctrinated and narrow-minded, an afterthought banished to history after 1990. Birgit, for her part, suffered both the anguish of having abandoned her daughter and seeing her own land disintegrate. Many East German readers likely will nod emphatically reading long passages from Birgit's incomplete novel. They do not mourn the death of a state whose legitimacy was never real, but at the same time, they are never truly reconciled to their roles in a reunited Germany or to adopting collective amnesia about East Germany's legacy.

Schlink is on sound footing through the first half of the novel, but its complexion changes once Svenja and Sigrun emerge. Where Birgit is a three-dimensional character tormented by mistakes and ambivalent about her identity, Svenja and especially Sigrun present as two-dimensional caricatures of what German and foreign media commentators have labeled "the far-right." Schlink uses the Sigrun character to voice a number of platitudes pushed by persons of this political persuasion.

Kaspar is clearly the most sympathetic actor, however, since Schlink uses his words on several occasions to rebut the rightist arguments and demonstrate how Sigrun is utterly defeated in response. Kaspar's goal throughout this section of the novel is clearly to conduct a covert battle for Sigrun's liberation, so as not to alienate Sigrun's increasingly suspicious parents. As noted, the reader may wholeheartedly detest the objectives of Germany's far-right and applaud Kaspar's motives, but stylistically, Schlink's abandonment of neutrality toward the East Germans and his own sympathy for Kaspar conspire to engineer a palpable shift in tone. To Schlink's credit, the novel ends ambivalently, without a resounding triumph for any side. This ultimately makes *The Granddaughter* a worthwhile read and one worth pondering as a paradigm of the modern Federal Republic, where competing historical narratives and their legacy still vie for supremacy within millions of hearts and minds. ■