



The Speckled People

By Hugo Hamilton
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Introduction

"Stories that you have to write down are different to stories that you tell people out loud," Hugo Hamilton's mother said to him, "because they're harder to explain and you have to wait for the right moment." *The Speckled People*, a deeply moving memoir about a family divided across cultures, is a story that had to be written down.

Hugo Hamilton was born in 1953, in the shadow of two World Wars and the Easter Uprising—events that not only changed the world but also shaped his family. Hugo's mother traveled to Ireland to learn English and escape a painful past in Germany. Never intending to leave her homeland for good, she stays when she marries an Irishman. Hugo's father believes the future lies in *The Speckled People*, "the new Irish, partly from Ireland, partly from somewhere else," a nationalistic zeal fueled by an attempt to re-create Ireland as it existed before the British.

Growing up in Dublin, Hugo struggles with the question of what it means to be speckled. As he says, "We don't just have one language, one history. We sleep in German and we dream in Irish. We laugh in Irish and we cry in German. We are *The Speckled People*." His father demands that his children speak Irish, and English is forbidden. His soft-spoken mother speaks to her children in her native tongue. But Hugo wants to speak English, which is what all the other children in Dublin speak. English is what they use when they call him "Eichmann" and bring him to trial at a mock seaside court.

The Speckled People is told through a child's eyes as he tries to understand the differences between Irish history and German history and to turn the strange logic of what he is told into truth. By turns poignant and comic, Hamilton's narrative weaves together childhood memories with historical events, stories of his ancestors, and long-hidden secrets from his parents' past. It is a journey that ultimately ends in liberation, a realization that he does not have to be caught at a cultural crossroads—he can embrace both.

Discussion Questions

1. Hugo Hamilton narrates this autobiographical memoir in the voice of a child. Why do you think he chose to filter his experiences this way? Does the child narrator say things that are too complicated for a child's voice?
2. Wearing German lederhosen with Irish sweaters, Hugo views himself as "Irish on top, and German below (p.2)," and thinks that "as a child you're like a piece of white paper with nothing written on it. My father writes down his name in Irish and my mother writes down her name in German and there's a blank space left over for all the people on the outside who speak English (p.3)." Do you think the English speakers have as much a claim to his identity as his mother and father? What do the English speakers outside have to say about his disjointed Irish/German identity? How does he negotiate between the three?
3. Compare the Hamilton's visit to An Cheathru Rua to their visit to Germany. An Cheathru Rua "was like being at home in the place where we all wanted to be for the rest of our lives (p.179)," and in Germany, "Nobody would ever call us Nazis. My father would have lots more friends and my mother would have all her sisters to talk to (p.217)." In one location, the whole family finds a united Irish identity, in the other, a German one. Are these identities assumed or real? Do you think it matters? How and why do they become foreign three times over once in Dublin?
4. Hugo's father "had the big idea of bringing people from other countries over to Ireland (p.39)," and after marrying the German Irmgard Kaiser, believed that his children would be the "new Irish." What does he mean by "new Irish"? Is it contradictory to expect multicultural children to be more authentically "Irish"?
5. Compare the qualities the novel attributes to the "fist people" and the "word people." Which term best describes Hugo's mother? His father?
6. Onkel Gerd instructs young Irmgard and her sisters to use the silent negative when swearing allegiance to the Fÿhrer. Irmgard uses the silent negative when assaulted by Stiegler, and instructs her sons to do the same when they are taunted and called Nazis. Given each circumstance, how effective is this as a form of resistance?
7. By the end of the novel, what does Hugo's father regret the most? His mother? Does his father accept losing "the language war"? What meaning would you ascribe to each parent's use of the phrase "[I would] make different mistakes this time (p.282, p.289)"?
8. Hugo describes several incidents in which family violence turns to comedy then sometimes to sadness. For instance, when Hugo's father threw appelkompost at Hugo at the dinner table (and his mother started laughing), when the children threw mashed potato at the ceiling (where the lumps stuck), when Hugo threw an egg at his mother (and it became a game they played)—tension dissolves into laughter. How does comedy work in these situations?
9. When Hugo is being beaten by bullies in the changing shed, his tormentors accuse him of being a Nazi. What happens when he acts like he is one? How do they react when he yells "Sieg Heil, Donner Messer Splitten, Himmel Blitzen" (p.292) and other nonsense words? When he throws his own shoes into the sea? Does this scene make you laugh or make you uncomfortable? How does humor protect Hugo? "Laugh at yourself and the world laughs with you. Execute yourself and nobody can touch you" (p.294)—do you agree?
10. Hugo's mother alleviates her homesickness for Germany by dressing her sons in lederhosen, maintaining German Christmas traditions, basically creating a German domestic life for her family within the confines of their home. Meanwhile, Germany itself divides politically and physically, so when she returns "she was lost. She couldn't recognize anything (p.296)." The home she longs for no longer exists. What, ultimately, can be considered "home"? How does *The Speckled People* resolve this question?

About the Author

Hugo Hamilton is the author of a collection of short stories and five novels, including *Headbanger* and *Sad Bastard*. In 1992, he was

awarded the Rooney Prize for Irish Literature. He currently lives in Berlin.