

**Rustic Baroque.** By JIŘÍ HÁJÍČEK. Translated by GALE A. KIRKING. Pp. ix + 201. Brno: Real World Press. 2012. CZK 285. Paperback. ISBN: 9788090535718.

Jiří Hájíček's third novel, *Selský baroko* (Rustic Baroque), originally published by Host in 2005, has been both a commercial and a critical success in the Czech Republic. It won the prestigious *Magnesia Litera* prize for prose in 2006. The English translation, *Rustic Baroque*, also includes selected stories from Hájíček's second collection of short stories, *Dřevěný nůž* (The Wooden Knife), published in 2004.

The novel is situated in the small villages of South Bohemia in the post-communist era. Pavel Straňanský, a professional genealogist, is commissioned by local politician Šrámek to shed light on his family line, or, as the politician himself formulates it, to 'make it a story' (p. 24). Yet what seems to make a more alluring story, and to which the genealogist is both naturally drawn and more than gently pushed by Šrámek, is the socialist past of the village of Tomašice, especially the time of agricultural collectivization of the early 1950s. Straňanský's attention is soon turned to the story of the local beauty of the time, Rozálie Zandlová. Rozálie lives in the villagers' memories not only as a coveted beauty, but also as a morally and ideologically corrupt young woman. The images of her conjured up by the villagers' memories suggest that she was involved in a scandal, and this is the puzzle that Straňanský eventually pieces together.

The title of the novel, *Rustic Baroque*, alludes to the South Bohemian architectural style called *selské baroko*. In the novel, the wealthy landowner Jircha's family house is built in this style. When Jircha is marked as a *kulak* by the new communist regime in the 1950s and is subsequently expelled from his property, *selské baroko* comes to stand for everything lost: a family heritage, a past that can no longer be recovered. The front cover of the English translation unnecessarily presses on the *selské baroko* connection by displaying a photo of an actual house in this style, making the cover look more like a guidebook to South Bohemia rather than a novel. The Czech cover, on the other hand, features a painting of a rural young woman in the Soviet socialist realist style, which seems more appropriate considering that the story revolves around agricultural collectivization and its consequences in closely-knit village communities. While the cover of the English translation makes sure that the reader knows where the story is set, the language of the translation does the exact opposite, undermining the Czech setting of the novel. For example, quintessentially American expressions like 'gee', 'jeez', and 'whaddya' take the reader to the Midwest rather than South Bohemia, and raise the question of whether the translator was fully aware of the consequences of his stylistic choices. Despite the problems with style and some awkward sentence patterns, Hájíček's story comes across strongly and clearly enough for the reader to fully enjoy the novel.

The intertwining stories of the past and present in *Rustic Baroque* pose questions about the relationship between individuals and history: those who record history and those who were themselves present during historical events. This relationship involves the people who remember it 'as if it was yesterday' (a frequently used phrase in the novel), people who write up events using Communist jargon and concepts, and people like Straňanský who attempt to make sense of the past by ploughing through records in the archives. But can one ever truly set the

record straight, correct past mistakes, rewrite history? In the novel, history is mainly used to fight (political) battles in the present; in this, Hájíček's novel is now ever more topical. The novel, as well as, more recently, the 2013 Czech presidential election debate over the expulsion of millions of Germans and Hungarians from Czechoslovakia after World War II, demonstrate that there are events in Czech(oslovak) history that have not yet been accounted for in a satisfactory manner. They remain hidden from view. As the protagonist of *Rustic Baroque* exclaims, 'All these stories are still here. In the countryside, in the fields, in the houses with people who might not know them anymore' (p. 49). To Straňanský, simply being aware of these stories is enough, but his mysterious colleague Daniela is from the opposite camp: 'the past needs to be set right, and with no more compromises!' (p. 138). Both sides are made tangible to the reader. Straňanský's way of preserving a cool detachment in relation to historical events befits his analytical researcher's mind. He is, however, addicted to stories and thus he is able to observe the past from many different angles. On the other hand, Daniela's passionate, 'eye-for-an-eye' attachment to setting the past right for her family's sake makes her blind to other interpretations of history; she sees and follows only one truth. What *Rustic Baroque* suggests, then, is that even though an awareness of history is essential, there are always details which keep slipping through our fingers, and that the truth about past events remains elusive. There is no clear answer to what our relation to history should ideally be – reserved or passionate, analytical or sentimental.

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