

*Hájíček, Jiří: Rustic Baroque. A Novel. With Additional Stories from The Wooden Knife by Jiří Hájíček. Translated from the Czech by Gale A. Kirking.*

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Jiří Hájíček (České Budějovice, born 1967) is a Czech prose writer, who has come to the readers' attention with his most recent novels *Selské baroko* (Rustic Baroque), 2005 and *Rybí krev* (Fish Blood), 2012. Both won the prestigious Magnesia Litera prize for literature. *Rustic Baroque* is his first work to appear in English. Translated by Gale A. Kirking, the volume also contains four short stories from the collection *Dřevěný nůž* (Wooden Knife), 2004. As Kirking states in the introduction, his selection of texts, the novel and short stories, was motivated by their setting in the South Bohemian region. It is his desire to introduce his readers to the Czech countryside, to lead them out of the Czech Republic's capital city of Prague.

Indeed, Kirking could not have chosen a better author to translate; "Rustic Baroque" belongs to the genre of village prose. In addition, Hájíček also draws on the detective genre, allowing for a complex and suspenseful presentation of the novel's main theme: the forced collectivization of independent farmers. The plot is set in a small village in South Bohemia a decade after the fall of communism. The narrator who stands at the center of the tale is a middle-aged historian, whose lack of financial stability forces him to take on the job of a genealogical researcher and occasional realtor of decrepit countryside homes. This work allows him to travel throughout the region and appreciate the peaceful atmosphere of small villages set in the picturesque landscape of lush forests and fields. Descriptive nature passages abound, but so does tendency toward pathetic fallacy, which dilutes the reader's own experience of the South Bohemian countryside. The narrator does not quite fit into this landscape, even though he grew up here, but his always-present laptop sets him apart. His incessant questioning and documenting raises suspicion among the villa-

ge folk. This is especially evident when he is commissioned to solve a mystery from the time of collectivization, to find a denouncement letter that resulted in several families' imprisonment and confiscation of their property. His painstaking research leads him to uncover much about the cruel destruction of farmsteads and countryside during the turbulent fifties, but also about ideological fervor, political ambition, power struggle, personal revenge, petty jealousy, and unrequited love. The fifties, which represent the harshest years of communism in Czechoslovakia, however, remain a taboo subject for many of the villagers who are unwilling to confront their past. The unresolved past haunts not only those who had lived during that period, but also the later generations. The narrator experiences this first hand when a young woman befriends him for the sole purpose of using his research to avenge her grandfather who happened to be one of the victims of the denouncement letter. Although, at the end, the mystery is solved, truth does not bring peace or resolution to anyone.

In "Rustic Baroque," Hájíček revisits a painful historical past that has received very little attention; the collectivization of farmsteads remains one of the least discussed crimes of the communist regime. Although, his tone is oftentimes preachy, even patronizing; his style is uneven, overrun by flat dialogues; and his characters are two-dimensional, he should be commended for writing about a subject matter that deserves a serious exploration and that no other writer of his generation has tackled.

"Rustic Baroque" is Kirking's translation debut. In his introduction he admits to his unbound enthusiasm for Hájíček's work and Czech culture, which he shares with his readers perhaps a bit forcefully in the translation itself. The many footnotes regarding names and their diminutive forms, details about Czech currency, various descriptions of locations and apartment building differences, are not only intrusive, but also unnecessary. These comments can be patronizing, replacing the experience of reading a novel with that of a cultural handbook. The translation also suffers from stylistic problems: the overuse of contractions ("I tell you, it's a letter. It's there somewhere, ... Maybe, there's ..." p.3); excessively informal language ("... It's risky for your health. Let's go have a beer, whaddya say?" p.13); and awkward sentences and mistakes ("I'll be happy to, so long as I'm invited" p. 20), ("He would never hurt anyone, and believe you me he had a heart of gold. In church every Sunday" p. 58). These issues could have been avoided had an editor been involved. Yet, in spite of these problems, which are not uncommon for a novice translator, it is to Kirking's credit that he did stay close to the original texts, in tone especially. Given that almost no English translations of fiction exist about the fifties, it is a valuable work, one that will be of interest to readers who want to learn more about this difficult decade in Czechoslovak history.