



Pociągi pod specjalnym nadzorem

Bohumil Hrabal

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To było tak - opowiadałem wprost w ucho pana zawiadowcy. - Ostatni nocny pociąg osobowy już odjechał, a od zmierzchu siedział z nami w kancelarii dyżurnego ruchu pewna wytworna dama, piła wino i paliła papierosy. Przed północą dyżurny ruchu, pan Całusek, mówi do mnie: "Miłoszu, wprawdzie jesteś dopiero praktykantem, ale ja mam do ciebie zaufanie. Posiedzisz tu za mnie jakieś dwie godzinki!". A więc zgodziłem się go zastąpić, za dyżurny ruchu, pan Całusek, udał się z ową damą do gabinetu pana zawiadowcy. Przyłożyłem ucho do drzwi i słyszę: "Ciacho ma swoje wymagania, koteczku, ciacho ma swoje prawa...".

Pociągi pod specjalnym nadzorem Details

Date : Published August 8th 2006 by Wiat Literacki (first published 1965)

ISBN :

Author : Bohumil Hrabal

Format : Paperback 93 pages

Genre : Fiction, European Literature, Czech Literature, Classics, Literature

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Dagio_maya says

"Mi dico, tanto i tedeschi sono matti.

Matti pericolosi.

Anche io ero un po' matto, ma a danno mio, mentre i tedeschi sempre a danno degli altri."

Letteralmente il titolo sarebbe: "Treni acutamente seguiti".

Così veniva segnalata ai ferrovieri l'attenzione particolare che si doveva a dare a treni carichi di ogni sorta di arma e munizione.

Treni che dovevano avere sempre il semaforo verde: precedenza assoluta alla morte!

In un'amalgama di tragicità e comicità si racconta questa storia di cui il protagonista è Milosh Hrma: un ferroviere apprendista che torna al suo lavoro dopo un tentativo di suicidio.

Tra personaggi stravaganti e situazioni grottesche Milosh vuole diventare uomo. Emblematicamente il nome della donna che porterà soddisfazione al ragazzo è (Vittoria Libera..). e nel momento dell'orgasmo i piaceri del corpo si confondono e si fondono con i boati della bombe:

"Dresda brucia!"

Destini individuali e corso della Storia s'intrecciano e rendono protagonista un giovane ferroviere che non vuole più proteggere la morte che passa sferragliando sulle rotaie ma, per una volta, fermarla e cantare un inno alla vita.

zumurruddu says

Primo Hrabal per me, se si esclude un tentativo fallito durante l'adolescenza. Forse non ero pronta per cogliere l'ironia praghese (di cui si parla diffusamente nell'intervista a Hrabal inclusa nel libro, ma non ci ho capito molto).

Ed è possibile non sia pronta neppure adesso, visto che leggendo questo breve romanzo non ho riso tanto (forse sorrido più adesso, ripensando alla telegrafista con il sedere stampigliato, che durante la lettura). Sono però rimasta spiazzata, stupita, coinvolta, questo sì, e anche con una sensazione di déjà-vu. Pensa che ti ripensa mi è venuto in mente cosa mi ricordava la strana miscela di grottesco, tragico, non-sense, le schegge di follia incastrate nel quotidiano, il quotidiano come capitato per sbaglio dentro i grandi eventi storici - il nazismo, la guerra, il bombardamento di Dresda, in questo caso... dicevo, alla fine mi è venuto in mente (e scusate se dico una castroneria): lo stile di Hrabal mi ricordava i film di Kusturica, almeno certi film di Kusturica, e certe scene di quei film... Hrabal più poetico, più sottile.

La scrittura scintillante evoca immagini vivide, deformazioni a volte giocose, a volte dolorose della realtà; ne esce vivido il personaggio principale, giovane ferroviere alle prese con le prime pene d'amore, se così si può dire, ragazzo tenero e ingenuo preso in un ingranaggio più grande di lui; ne escono vividi i personaggi di contorno, un po' caricature, un po' poveri disgraziati; ne esce vivido, soprattutto il dolore, pur nella leggerezza del racconto, tra episodi un po' folli, un po' disperati, un po' assurdi... tutto dolcemente e tragicamente umano.

Carol says

A couple of months ago, I bought this slim volume at the Globe Bookstore and Cafe in Prague on the last afternoon of a 9-day school tour with my 15-year old daughter and several of her classmates. We had perhaps 45 minutes in which to identify purchases, enjoy beverages, split a salad, and read passages to each other from the books we selected. At the time, I shared with her portions of one of the other books I bought, and saved this one until now. I will remember that afternoon, the Globe and the time we spent in each other's company in Prague for some time to come.

Closely Observed Trains takes place in Czechoslovakia near the end of WWII. First published in 1965 and one of Hrabal's best known novels, it is part coming-of-age, part war-is-hell, part fantastic. The first 80 pages reminded me of many, unremembered and unremarkable classics I've read through the years. The last five pages are unforgettable. This book is a 4-star read for me, in part, because, on every page, I recalled our time together in Prague and was grateful again for the opportunity to walk its streets, begin to appreciate its rich history and still recent experience of war and occupation, and to spend that time with my daughter. I will look for more Hrabal novels.

Ana says

Neste livro, os "comboios rigorosamente vigiados" são comboios militares, sob vigilância especial, que transportam armamento e suporte para as tropas alemãs que, na frente leste, tentam evitar o avanço das tropas russas no período derradeiro da Segunda Guerra Mundial.

Milos Hrbal é um jovem de vinte e dois anos que trabalha como factor numa pequena estação ferroviária, algures na Checoslováquia ocupada pelos nazis e próxima da fronteira com a Alemanha. O pouco movimento da estação faz com que a Milos sobeje tempo para dar largas à sua imaginação e assim vai vivendo entre a realidade, o imaginário e algumas evocações do seu passado das quais ficamos a conhecer alguns dos seus antepassados: o pai reformado aos quarenta e oito anos e que agora recolhe ferro velho, o avô hipnotizador que tentou travar a invasão alemã hipnotizando tanques de guerra, o bisavô que recebia uma renda que gastava em rum e tabaco e andava à pancada pelo menos uma vez por ano.

Milos vive atormentado pela falta de afirmação da sua masculinidade, porque na sua primeira experiência sexual, chegado ao momento crucial, "murchou como um lírio". Recupera a confiança junto de uma mulher mais velha e o futuro acaba por lhe reservar o papel de herói.

O meu comboio de munições ia chegar dentro de vinte minutos e eu poderia realizar uma grande coisa, porque já não era um lírio murcho.

Comboios Rigorosamente Vigiados é uma narrativa peculiar, onde o humor, a ternura e a tragédia se misturam, e cuja maioríssima parte funciona como uma espécie de prólogo para o final. É o segundo livro que leio deste autor e, embora sem o deslumbre de *Uma Solidão Demasiado Ruidosa*, foi impossível não sorrir, não me enternecer e não deixar que os olhos se me embaciassem por momentos. Uma parábola que, com sensibilidade e subtilidade, nos deixa uma mensagem sobre a falta de sentido das guerras, qualquer que seja o lado em que se combate.

... e no entanto aquele soldado era um homem como eu ou como o senhor Hubicka, não tinha divisas nem condecorações, e tínhamos disparado uma bala um contra o outro (...) quando certamente, se nos tivéssemos encontrado na vida civil, teríamos simpatizado e conversado.

Esta obra, originalmente publicada em 1965, foi adaptada ao cinema em 1966 e o filme ganhou o Oscar para melhor filme estrangeiro sendo, ainda hoje, considerado por muitos o melhor filme checo de sempre.

K.D. Absolutely says

A coming-of-age story of a young railwayman in German-occupied Czechoslovakia during World War II. Bohumil Hrabal (1914-1997) was a Czech writer said to be the greatest Czech novelist of the 20th century. Previous to this book, the only popular writer I have read was Milan Kundera (born 1929). In this book's back cover, this is what Kundera says about the book:

"an incredible union of earthly humor and baroque imagination."

. Although this is true, I think Kundera's oversimplification of the novel's central idea does not do enough justice to what this book is all about.

The story opens with Miloš Hirma enjoying his new railway man uniform. It is his first day at work as a predecessor of his father who has just retired as a railwayman. He is still a virgin and so he is being picked on by his older co-worker, train dispatcher Hubi?ka. He has a crush on conductor Máša but when they make out, he ejaculated prematurely. So Hubi?ka arranges for a Viktoria Freie, a Resistance spy to teach Miloš how to properly make love to a woman.

All these with Hitler's army and the repression of Czechoslovakia serving as a backdrop. I've read many books about the Holocaust including the 1959 Gunter Grass' opus The Tin Drum. Although I liked those books that directly tackle Holocaust, like Thomas Keneally's Schindler's List (4 stars), Ellie Wiesel's Night (4 stars), Primo Levi's Survival in Auschwitz (4 stars), etc., especially because of the movies too, I think I have read so many of them that I have in a way already have a solid idea on what when on in the concentration camps. So, if there is a novel that is set outside the concentration camp especially in the German occupied countries, it is a welcome relief.

What makes this book remarkable are the parts where the author concentrates on what's going on in the mind of his protagonist. The innocence of a young man who is idolizing this happy-go-lucky father and the sexual awakening is probably reflective of the countries that fall in Hitler's claw. Did countries at that time become disillusioned as they became powerless? This novel seems to be telling me that. This is something similar to the young people in the Philippines when the Americans or Japanese colonized the country during the tumultuous World War II.

I agree with Wiki that Hrabal is a great novelist. This book is just thin and short but it is huge in message and can be interpreted in so many ways that if you don't find it great, I am not sure which book you can classify as that.

Jale says

Sava? e?lenceli bir ?ekilde anlat?labilir mi? Evet, anlat?labiliyor. Sava??n g?ndelik hayata yans?mas?n? kahraman?m?z Milo?'?n basit anlat?m?yla dinliyoruz. Biz Hrabal'? çokça tan?m?yoruz belki, ama Milan Kundera hayran?... Ve son c?mlenin a??r???;

"Son ana, kendi kendimi g?zden yitirinceye kadar ?lü erle eleleydik ve ben, erin sa??r kula??na, bahts?z Almanlar? Dresden'den getiren mar?andizdeki tren ?efinin s?yledi?i s?z? tekrarlay?p duruyordum: "Evinizde oturup kalsayd?n?z da g?tünüz?n ?st?nde..."

Nigeyb says

'Closely Watched Trains'

by Bohumil Hrabal

For a book that is a mere 84 pages, and beautifully reissued in the wonderful Penguin Modern Classics imprint, it packs a heck of a lot in.

22 year old Milos, is a depressed apprentice with low self esteem who works at a small and sleepy Czech railway station during the last months of World War 2. His life is full of worries: his failure to consummate his relationship with the pretty conductor Masha, the scandalous - and highly amusing - goings-on in the station master's office, his paranoia, and his family's unpopularity in the community.

'Closely Watched Trains' is beautifully written (and translated) and is yet another example of just how much good east European literature there is from the mid 20th century. Other examples I have enjoyed include 'The Good Soldier Švejk' by Jaroslav Hašek, the work of Stefan Zweig, and doubtless many more I could remember when I have time to ponder it.

This is an accomplished, moving, funny, compassionate, unusual, and informative novel with a strong sense of time and place. It's so enjoyable that I am moving straight on with another book by Bohumil Hrabal, 'Cutting It Short'.

4/5

Bohumil Hrabal met a rather tragic end...

Suicide or accident?: The Death of the Sad King of Czech Literature, Bohumil Hrabal...

When Bohumil Hrabal either jumped or fell from a fifth floor window of Prague's Bulovka Hospital while feeding pigeons at 2:30 p. m. on February 3, 1997, it marked the end of a phenomenal literary career spanning six decades and contributing enormously to Czech culture. His death from the fifth floor has an undoubted symbolic dimension, whether sought or merely coincidental: In his works he wrote about philosophers and writers who had jumped to their deaths from the fifth storey and even confessed that he

sometimes wanted to jump from the fifth floor window of his flat. Whether he did jump or whether he fell will forever remain a mystery. Yet one thing was for certain. The sad king of Czech literature was dead.

The rest of the article is here...

<https://www.private-prague-guide.com/...>

Laysee says

Closely Watched Trains is a slender but tightly and skillfully written novella. There is not one superfluous word or allusion. Its economy of expression, darkly spiced with humor, is in sharp contrast to the seriousness of its intent – an anthem for doomed youth set in German occupied Czechoslovakia in 1945.

Bohumil Hrabal once worked as a railway laborer and this story about Milos Hrma, a 22-year-old apprentice railway dispatcher, seems to draw richly on his experience. Milos is a troubled young man who worries excessively about his manhood, which he most wishes to demonstrate toward Masha, his lady love. While he watches trains as part of his job, he thinks people are watching him. Milos behaves as if life is not worth living and Hrabal captures his despair with gentle lyricism. Yet it is quite clear that Milos wants above all to stay alive and show the world he is truly a man.

Life post World War II is bleak and Milos who watches the trains registers with his keen eye fragments of shattered lives in the carriages: blood stains, glass on the floor, a long bandage, a child's striped ball, ailing or dead cattle. On the close surveillance medical trains, he feels a pang when he sees wounded soldiers who are boys his age or younger. Here is a poignant description: *'And in this mobile sick-bay at which I was gazing, the strangest thing was the human eyes, the eyes of all those wounded soldiers. As though that agony there at the front, the agony they had inflicted on others and which others now were afflicting on them, had turned them into different people... They all peered through the windows into the dull countryside so attentively, with such childlike earnestness, as though they were passing through paradise itself, as though in my little station they saw a jewel-box.'* All this does not detract Milos from the beauty around him: the palpitating stars, radiant night, and crackling of frozen snow. Hrabal writes beautifully.

There is also in this novella a zest for life, a frivolity that is welcome and takes the edge off the harsh realities. This centers on Dispatcher Hubicka, Milos' immediate supervisor, whose romp with a sexy telegraphist makes him a celebrity and envy of the town. Milos looks upon Hubicka as an ideal, and that ironically is his undoing.

I felt tenderly toward Milos who is given to solitude. He is a young man with a whole life laid before him. He has no lofty ambition. His needs are primal. But it seems he is predestined for a mission he would not want to be part of if he could only anticipate the cost to himself.

This tiny but powerful book brings to the fore the pathos of war. Soldiers on opposing sides are just sons of mothers who cannot rest until their children are home safe. Time and again, this shared humanity is obliterated in war times and brought to awareness only too late.

Read **Closely Watched Trains**. Gravity and frivolity dwell side by side in unimaginable harmony.

Jeff Jackson says

Thank you to Goodreads for deleting my previous review. Did I slander Bohumil Hrabal by saying this short novel wasn't as exceptional as *I SERVED THE KIND OF ENGLAND* or *TOO LOUD A SOLITUDE*, but still worth your time? Or by mentioning the odd but largely successful mix of historical horror, ribald comedy, and subverted coming-of-age tropes? Or by pointing out that the novel seems intentionally disorienting for the first couple of chapters but eventually feels as precise as a stationmaster's pocket watch?

Sawsan says

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Pat says

In un paesino della Cecoslovacchia occupata dai nazisti, Milosh, allievo ferroviere ingenuo e timido, dopo essere “sfiorito come un giglio”, tenta il suicidio. Tre mesi dopo riprende il suo posto nella piccola stazione da cui passano treni “strettamente sorvegliati” carichi di munizioni, soldati e bestiame destinato al macello. Corrono i treni sui binari mentre il ticchettio dell’orologio scandisce lo scorrere della vita. L’atmosfera è cupa. È “quell’anno lì, il quarantacinque”. I tedeschi cercano di resistere all’avanzata russa. Dalla stazioncina s’ode il rombo delle esplosioni, si vede il rosso dei fuochi lontani. In un clima del tutto surreale si presenta, per Milosh, l’occasione di “rifiorire”. Diventerà uomo e, inconsapevolmente, eroe nel momento in cui perde di vista se stesso.

Prosa immaginifica, folle, comicamente tragica. Il sorriso ha un retrogusto amaro. Milosh ha in sé tutta la forza dei semplici e la delicatezza dei puri. Dolce e malinconico, doloroso e gaio. Di una tenerezza infinita. Ci si affeziona, non si può fare altrimenti. E rimane lì, in fondo al cuore, anche dopo aver chiuso il libro.

Bisogna essere bravi per mescolare orrore e poesia, Bohumil. Tu l’hai fatto.

Orsodimondo says

TRENI ACUTAMENTE OSSERVATI

Nella stazioncina il capostazione aspetta di essere promosso ispettore, ha la divisa nuova già pronta nell’armadio, e alleva colombi: prima della guerra allevava i bagadesi di Norimberga, ma quando i tedeschi invadono la Polonia, li strozza tutti e li sostituisce con altri, le linci polacche.

I treni passano da est a ovest e da ovest a est, con vagoni a volte pieni di soldati e infermiere, a volte crivellati di pallottole, a volte pieni di animali ridotti alla fame e disidratati immersi tra compagni già cadaveri.

Il capomanovra a mezzanotte ha sollevato la gonna della telegrafista, l'ha fatta stendere sul tavolo, le ha sfilato le mutandine e le ha stampato sul sedere tutti i timbri, almeno la metà dei quali in lingua tedesca. Lei, adesso tutta timbrata, sembra più bella di prima e pensa di darsi al cinema. Lui subisce un processo per il suo gesto oltraggioso e decide di far saltare in aria un convoglio.

Con l'aiuto di Milos, giovane apprendista manovratore, ma non così giovane da non poter conoscere l'amore di Masa e da non poter conoscere la morte: ma così giovane da soffrire di eiaculazione precoce, così giovane da perdere la verginità con un'artista di circo, così giovane da arrampicarsi fin dove non c'è più ritorno.

E, alla fine, la scoperta!

La scoperta che anche i tedeschi sono umani, più umani dei capretti, di tutti gli animali e ... *di qualunque cosa subiva una disgrazia...*

Sembra una favola, un bel racconto, divertente e un po' folle: e invece, parla della Seconda Guerra Mondiale, dell'occupazione nazista della Cecoslovacchia. Parla dell'orrore - ma in un altro modo.

Nel modo e nella forma dei grandi.

Tutte le immagini sono tratte dal film omonimo del 1966 diretto da Jirí Menzel.

Joselito Honestly and Brilliantly says

Originally written in Czech. I have a suspicion this translation by Edith Pargeter lost a lot, but it is still good enough for me for a perfect GR score. DREAMLIKE, it there's a word for it. Reading it gave me this experience: when disparate dreams come in sequence at night, each one understood completely as they pass before the eyes which open when one is asleep, each dream segment seeking to connect with the others, then backing off, one at a time, as if saying goodbye, yet making wordless promises to return when your need to remember comes. Then you wake up with the residual memory of your experience. And in those lazy moments between sleep and complete wakefulness you say to yourself that you will remember this dream, so funny, or sad, or strange. Your father, long gone, laughing at some joke, flashing his small, rotten teeth in glee. What could this mean? You will tell your wife later...But then you forget.

Imagine if you could write like Bohumil Hrabal and make your readers feel as if they are WATCHING such dreams. They are no longer the dreamers, but an audience. Probably even the dreamt of, watching themselves live inside other people's subconscious, seeing themselves reflected in a mirror.

Mohamad says

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Hadrian says

I thought this was supposed to be a short story. How did Hrabal fit so much of somebody's life into just under 100 pages?

Nicole~ says

The coming-of-age story of Milos Hrma - a young, naïve railwayman - unfolds in a small lethargic train station, set in North Bohemia, Prague during the last two weeks of WWII, 1945. Milos narrates a tale which covers a timespan of 48 hours in a series of flashbacks, where it is revealed how the scars on his wrists came to be and how three generations of Hrma men managed to besmirch their family name.

Milos's day is spent dreamily watching military trains pass through to the front transporting the injured and dying; displaced refugees who had lost their homes in bombings; even dead or dying animals - evoking a clear picture of the chaotic period as a result of the impending German collapse.

The plot moves surrealistically, from a natural to humorous manner: the daily lives and interactions of the townfolk; the histrionics of his forebears; the German Occupation and movement of Nazi troops from the front; Milos's humiliating 'first time' with his girlfriend that later prompted a suicide attempt; the licentious scene with dispatcher Hubi?ka, inkstamping the derrière of the female telegraphist. I found such ribald scenes and periodic, foolish, digressive banter to be quite amusing, highlighting Hrabal's skill at veiling human drama with his distinctive sense of humor. About Milos's grandfather who thought himself a "hypnotist:"

In this tank waist-deep in the cabin stood an officer of the Reich, with a black beret with the death's- head badge and crossed bones on his head, and my grandfather kept on going steadily forward, straight toward this tank, with his hands stretched out, and his eyes spraying towards the Germans the thought: 'Turn around and go back!'

And really, that tank halted. The whole army stood still. Grandfather touched the leading tank with his outstretched fingers, and kept pouring out towards it the same suggestion: 'Turn around and go back, turn around and...'. And then the lieutenant gave a signal with his pennant, and the tank changed its mind and moved forward, but grandfather never budged, and the tank ran over him and crushed his head, and after that there was nothing standing in the way of the German army.

Milos's youthful idealistic view of Hubi?ka, and a personal, perhaps subconscious, drive to remove the stigma from his family name -particularly his grandfather's doomed effort- lead him to accept a dangerous mission that culminates in a dramatic heroic deed, as he mercilessly exclaims:

"You should have sat at home on your arse..."

War fictionistas who have read All's Quiet on the Western Front would note echoes of a similar fateful and humanistic scene.

Bohumil Hrabal's short, postwar novel is a stunning blend of humor, humanity, tragedy and heroism, justifiably earning the appellation of "masterpiece." Highly recommend.

Other books I've read by Bohumil Hrabal here.

From wikipedia.org:

Bohumil Hrabal (Czech pronunciation: [ˈboʊumʲl ˈɦrabal]) (28 March 1914 – 3 February 1997) was a Czech writer, regarded by many Czechs as one of the best writers of the 20th century. During the war, he worked as railway labourer and dispatcher in Kostomlaty, near Nymburk, an experience reflected in one of his best-known works *Ostře sledované vlaky* (Closely Observed Trains).

BlackOxford says

A Noir Farce.

In the closing months of WW II in provincial Czech, the social system of the national railways copes with the German military, allied raids, and the sexual fetishes of the local dispatcher. Amidst the detritus of war - dead and dying live-stock, wrecked railway carriages, crashed fighter planes, the dead and wounded returning from the front - the station-master's concern is principally the well-being of his Polish pigeons and the sanctity of his Turkish-themed office.

But an undercurrent is also clear: 'The Germans are swine but they're our swine and they will be victorious and we will have a Free Europe' is the attitude of one German-speaking official. Resistance takes place but only about as casually as collaboration. *Closely Watched Trains* was first published in 1965 while Czechoslovakia was united and Communist. Soviet tanks were to roll through within three years during the Prague Spring. The theme of keeping one's head down with the dominant force must have caused a stir despite the black comedy that dominates the book.

What is important to all the characters is really not the outcome of the war, or even whether German or Czech is the official national language, but the experience of their own lives. Or inexperience, as the case may be. A young man's sexual inadequacy, a young woman's hopes of cinematic stardom, organisational advancement, the disciplinary process of the railways. Life, in other words, goes on, petty details are

important even, perhaps especially, in the midst of chaos. Ultimately Hrabal's pointed irony is probably the only way to deal with the powerlessness in such an overwhelming condition.

Bettie? says

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b067vjwk>

Description: *It is 1945. For gauche young apprentice Milos Hrma, life at the sleepy railway station in Bohemia is full of complex preoccupations. There is the burden of dispatching German troop trains; the shocking scandal of Dispatcher Hubicka; and the vexing problem of his sexual performance. Classic comedy drama from a celebrated Czech writer.*

Director/Producer Gary Brown

CLOSELY OBSERVED TRAINS, which became the award-winning Jiri Menzel film of the 'Prague Spring', is a classic of postwar literature, a small masterpiece of humour, humanity and heroism which fully justifies Hrabal's reputation.

Milos is played by John Bradley who is Samwell Tarley in 'Game of Thrones'. This is John's first radio play.

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0060802/>

Steve says

Actually, 3.5 stars...

Set in the final year of the Second World War, *Ost?e sledované vlaky* weaves together the rather exaggerated personal story of a young apprentice for the Czech national train company (embarrassed by premature ejaculation, he tries to commit suicide; his grandfather tries to stop the invading German army solely with his mental powers of suggestion - his family has to go to Prague to recover the skull from the tread of a tank; he beds a beautiful complete stranger (a German, at that) on the station master's couch merely by telling her that he is virgin) with the bits of the greater tragedy which can be seen from the platforms of a provincial train station. Hrabal (1914–1997) initially employs rapidly changing flashbacks whose pace slows as the broadly humorous strand of events at the station house converges with the tragic and ominous strand of events occurring in the outside world to meld into an event in which participate black humor, sentimentality, tragedy and the absurd. Though I find aspects of the structure of this novella to be more imposed than organic, it is remarkable what a range of life Hrabal manages to fit into 91 pages...

Tsung says

This is a surprising book. Not quite the grandiosity of *I Served the King of England* or the charm of *Too*

Loud a Solitude, yet there is something different about this slender book of 84 pages. So unobtrusive is this book, that you might miss it on a shelf full of bigger books. Yet for a short book, it speaks volumes.

Bohumil Hrabal is a great story teller. His inimitable style is evident from the first page. It is cheeky, hilarious, irreverent, naughty and ribald. But it is not all lightheartedness and he can give his tales a darker, more somber spin. The amazing thing is how he hides the gruesomeness amidst the frivolity, presenting catastrophic events innocuously and how he manages to change the tone of the book without being noticed.

Set in 1945 in a Czech town, the Germans are on the back foot, but they are still making their presence felt. These German, closely watched trains, still pass through the train station and are given priority in passage. We follow the exploits of the station staff. The central figure is the hapless Milo Hrma, an unassuming, insecure young man with an embarrassing family history. He works at the station along with larger than life characters, including the pigeon-covered station master Lansky, the randy, libidinous dispatcher Hubicka, the floozy telegraphist Virginia and the conductress Masha. Despite their foibles and absurdities, there is a touch of longing and vulnerability which makes them human and worthy of empathy.

Tucked between the hilarious tales were dark episodes. Two events stood out in particular. (view spoiler)

Amongst his books, this novel is possibly Hrabal's most powerful statement about war. While the characters express anti-German sentiment, Hrabal adds a different dimension to it. Juxtaposed in the background was the Allied devastation of Dresden. *But now, as these Dresdeners came flocking here out of their city, I could no longer pity them, nobody could pity them, except they themselves. And those Germans knew it. Now one of them burst out weeping, in such a strange way, almost cooing, like the station-master's pigeons when the raid disturbed them, and then his weeping became human, and only then did his body relax. And the other Germans began to blow their noses, and then they all burst into tears, every one in a different way, but fundamentally this was human crying, lamentation over what had happened.*

Then a twist in the plot. (view spoiler)

"Sollten Sie am Arsch zu Hause sitzen."
