



The Little Town Where Time Stood Still and Cutting It Short

Bohumil Hrabal , James Naughton (Translator) , Josef Škvorecký (Introduction)

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Includes *The Little Town Where Time Stood Still* and *Cutting It Short*.

In the 1930s Europe is tangoing to the tune of a new age, but in rural Czechoslovakia Maryska dances to a rhythm all her own. In a town dominated by a somber municipal brewery, she is a colorful and rather alarming apparition speeding through the quiet village on her bicycle, her long, tempestuous hair billowing behind her. Not even her husband, Francin (the brewery manager), can control her, as Maryska shocks the populace with her scandalous behavior, and incurs the disapproval of a proper little town that is blissfully unaware of the cataclysmic world events into which it is about to be engulfed. As World War II draws to a close and communism looms on the horizon, Maryska and her town appear to have survived unscathed. But subtle changes begin to appear - in Maryska and her family, and most noticeably at the brewery, where the new political order creates tensions that tear through the social fabric of the town in ways that Maryska in her wildest days could not possibly have imagined. The two linked narratives brought together in *The Little Town Where Time Stood Still* comprise Bohumil Hrabal's poignant and witty evocation of the passing of an era and display a master writer at the height of his powers as he creates, in an enchanting fictional work, an elegy for a nation that is no more.

The Little Town Where Time Stood Still and Cutting It Short Details

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Author : Bohumil Hrabal , James Naughton (Translator) , Josef Škvorecký (Introduction)

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Judy Vasseur says

A masterful interweaving of the sacred with the human more cheerfully crafted than Flannery O'Connor. A juxtapositioning of the crude with the spiritual, like the blending of spices in a Thai soup, like that elusive Umami, the Japanese 5th flavor...the same strangely delicious monosodium glutamate of Southern Gothic fare.

It's like a painting. This book is a saturated, sensuous and earthy contemplation of the joys and rewards of being bad; also a detailed examination of familiar but ecstatic notions, small machines, breakage and accidents, human toil and skill, food and drink, suffering animals, and quirky personalities through a lusty Bohumil Hrabal lens. Every now and then he slips in something so profound it makes you stop in mid-sentence and stare straight ahead or some extreme fatalism so shocking you have to hee haw for several minutes.

Reading paragraphs here is like dusting objects in a cabinet of curiosities—It's wise to take it slow and admire the colors and gently fondle each strange shape.

This is also a humorous view of the collision of completely opposite personalities existing side by side within families. Ever wonder how you can have the same DNA as the rest of your family? Or what planet the stork brought you in from? Aside from all the tension and comedic fatalism, it is a loving tale of two brothers and a tender tale of growing old.

An excellent article on Hrabal is available to read online here:
<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v23/n01/james-wo...>

Needless to say I am pissed off that more of this man's novels have not been translated into English.

Richard says

I can't for the life of me understand why the translator gave Uncle Pepin a Scottish accent.

Aside from that, pretty good.

Rogier says

Cutting It Short and The Little Town Where Time Stood Still are two books in one about life in a small czech town ignored by the history that surrounds it.

Not much happens in the little town where time stood still. Wars start and wars end. New technology gets kicked in the butt as the townspeople make beer, drink beer, and talk beer with their minds and stories rooted in a cloudy past and their worst nightmare is the art of motorcycle maintenance. Even their hair becomes part

of the local history as time happens to other people somewhere else and strangers come and go but don't stay long. Makes you wonder if this can go on forever, especially when the clock starts turning backwards and cars that used to run on gasoline are fueled by wood.

And then time gets moving and history catches up and everything falls apart.

Tony says

There are chapters texturally without breaks, and run-on sentences, and shifting points of view and digressions; which I do not offer as a complaint, but maybe as an excuse should this review appear choppy. There are two novellas in this edition, and they certainly go together as they are drawn in the same sleepy town with the same cast of characters and the second one picks up eight years after the first one ends.

CUTTING IT SHORT

I had just read Madame Bovary and the epigram at the front of this book is : *La Bovary, c'est moi* - GUSTAVE FLAUBERT. And, the condensed *What'sItAbout* on the back cover of the book says that Mary?ka, the narrator, is *a Madame Bovary without apologies driven to keep up with the new fast-paced mechanized modern world that is obliterating whatever sleepy pieties are left over from the defunct Austro-Hungarian Empire*. And those that write squibs for the back of books are at least as smart as those who run the government.

So I'm probably wrong, but I didn't get the comparison. Emma is an adulteress, but cold-blooded and calculating. Mary?ka is probably not an adulteress, but a spontaneous, hot-blooded flirt. Both women are married to respected, professional husbands. But Emma's Charles, a doctor, is a clueless cuckold. Francin, a brewery manager, sees Mary?ka 'making sausages' with the butcher and then husking corn in the fall - *and there again, a decent woman just doesn't scrub corn on the cob quite like that, and if she does, well not with such a great laughter and flaming eyes as mine, if some male stranger were to see this, he might see in my hands scrubbing that corn on the cob some sort of sign favourable to his hankerings* - and, there being nothing he could do to stop such a spirit, he would take a sledge and demolish a shed. He demolished a lot of sheds.

The original title of this novella, in Czech, was *Postřižiny*, which the nyrb Introduction teaches is "a word referring to the Slavic and also Jewish tradition of ritualizing a child's first haircut." I like that better. But there are lots of things cut short here: a dog's tail; table legs; Mrs. Krásenka's nose; and, yes, eventually Mary?ka's hair. Mary?ka had very long hair, to her feet I think. And, now that I bring it up, Hrabal uses Mary?ka's hair as a character much as Flaubert used Emma's skirt. No one loved Mary?ka's hair as much as Francin, even if we know it's all symbolism for the old ways and the advance of modernity.

Apparently there was a 1980 movie based on this novella. I hadn't seen it. Here's a link, of a 2 minute and 11 second clip from it; but let me forewarn that there is a spanking scene within that may seem abusive: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5E7Oz...> I offer this so you can get some sense of the bawdiness of the story, but also for another reason for those that have read and re-read Madame Bovary and know the minutiae so well. Look again at this brief clip. Watch when the camera takes a long shot of the square. Then ask yourself, if this isn't like Madame Bovary, then what the hell is Hippolyte doing there?

THE LITTLE TOWN WHERE TIME STOOD STILL

The story continues, eight years later, but the narrator has changed. Now the son of Mary?ka and Francin

tells the story, beginning with an opening vignette about how he got a tattoo on his chest but (you can see it coming) not the one he paid for. He recedes as a character after that and there's less of Maryska, sadly; although he says: *I wanted my mum to be just like the other boys' mums, motherly, maternal, but my mum was still a young lady . . .* This after a rather public display of dancing that led Francin to say: *a decent woman oughtn't to dance in such positions .*

..

The focus turns more to Francin, and his brother 'Uncle Pepin'. For you can not have a novel of digressions except that you have an uncle in it, right Toby?

A different kind of modernity comes to town, Communism taking over the brewery. Francin, who has always been a kind boss, does not understand why he must be terminated. The workers explain the irony: because he was always so kind, it took them longer to take over the brewery.

Dad's lamentation rose to heaven, but I knew that the Lord God didn't actually love the truth so much, in fact he loved madmen, crazy exalted enthusiasts, people like my Uncle Pepin, the Lord God loved to hear untruth reiterated in faith, he adored the exalted lie more than the dry unadorned truth . . .

So, you know, maybe there's still relevance.

Katherine says

*3.75 stars. Despite my entrancement with the first few pages (see note below), I can't give the two linked novellas a full four stars. I found my interest flagging at times, particularly during the second story. His long sentences felt more burdensome than descriptive and interesting in certain passages. I am glad I read this volume, however. Those first pages and the story of Maryska will stay with me.

*The first few pages of this book--all about lamplight--have me more impressed by any writing I've encountered recently. I'm simultaneously thrilled, envious of the author's ability, and in awe. Here are some shorter quotations that gave me pause and appreciation:

"...and one day he read a notice in the paper: Suffer from boredom? Get yourself a racoon [sic]" (33).

"...and chuckled and chuckled, to avoid asphyxiating with mirth" (82).

"...a mixture that sends your body purring all over with approval" (86).

"...from the heat of the thirsty charcoal..." (89).

"...one of his joyful laughs that made the hair of just Christians stand on end..." (147).

"...the coloured birds embroidered the air..." (154).

"...and St Hilary from the square would appear unto us, our patron saint of healthy laughter" (160).

"...she got up and took a long wreath of sausages and set about counting them, as if she were praying the rosary" (214).

"...there ran thick eiderdowns of red geraniums" (288).

Tsung says

“There’s something about Mary(ska)”

Can I say that? She’s coquettish, free spirited, adventurous, vivacious, mischievous and rambunctious. Why haven’t I met her before?

Anyway, I really like this book. It’s quirky, funny, irreverent, ribald, slapstick and absurd. Why haven’t I read this before?

It consists of two stories. The stories revolve around a small family in a small Czech town before World War II. Maryska is married to Fracin, who manages the local brewery, and could not be more polarized from her in terms of personality. He is far more straitlaced and conservative. Yet they make a close couple. Thrown into the mix is the even more rambunctious, eccentric, jovial, outspoken, happy-go-lucky Uncle Pepin, Fracin’s brother. He’s even bizarrely given a Scottish accent.

The first story is “Cutting It Short” and is told from Maryska’s point of view. She stumbles from one misadventure to the next. At the end, she takes a radical step of raising her hemline above the knees as well as cutting her hair short. It’s a sign of the times, of modernization and of changing fashions. Fracin rejects this change and gives her bottom an old fashioned spanking.

The second story is “The Little Town Where Time Stood Still” and is told by Fracin and Maryska’s son. The misadventures continue and involve different family members. The hijinks come to an abrupt end with World War II. Yet the impact we see the impact on the family is minimal. Uncle Pepin even becomes a hero of sorts with his defiance of the Germans. Then comes the ominous communist takeover and it was heart breaking to see the family lose almost everything. It was enough to crush Uncle Pepin’s spirit, something which even the Germans could not do, turning him into a shadow of his former self. In contrast to the changing times in the first story, time now stood still for this town.

The book was great fun. Most of it was hilarious and frivolous. Yet it ended on a more serious, thought provoking note. Now I’m curious about Czech literature.

El says

This book, beginning with *Cutting It Short*, is the story of Mary - whose long hair is of local legend - her husband, Fracin - who manages the brewery in a small town - and Uncle Pepin - who comes to visit and never quite leaves again. As society changes and the town catches up to itself and as Communism enters the stage their own lives change in order to accommodate their environment, all in a Hrabal-manner of course, entertaining and sometimes disconcerting. *The Little Town Where Time Stood Still* makes up the second part of the book in which Mary and Fracin's son tells his story. Interestingly to me is that Hrabal's own family shared the same names (Maryska, Fracin, Pepin) and I wonder how much was autobiographical, without knowing that much about the author to begin with.

These were two very good stories but clearly I was not in the mood for Hrabal. I recently watched the movie version of *Closely Watched Trains* and again while I enjoyed it something did not sit well with me. It's certainly just me and I can not find it in my heart to blame Hrabal.

Cu?ng Say says

love-ly, love-ly, and love-ly. Recommended.

Malcolm says

Bohemia in the 1920s where small town life stifles, and the city (Prague) seems the source of all delight. Partly nostalgic, partly a celebration of a life, a place, a people. Gorgeous, droll, divine.

This was filmed in the early 1980s as *Cutting It Short*, one of those masterful pieces of Czech cinema, and co-written in film form and directed by Jirí Menzel, who also worked on the film versions of *Closely Observed Trains* and *I Served the King of England* - Hrabal's better known books. It is worth trying to track down.

Dennis says

This is really two novellas about life in a Czech town just before communism really took hold and changed things. The original was changed by the authorities but in its unrevised form, it's really a touching and funny book. If there's one thing that's striking, it's that small towns are alike all over the world, a collection of stories which everyone knows (as opposed to a big city which can be considered a collection of unknown stories.) There are no secrets and memories live forever (as do vendettas.) Having lived in the Czech Republic, I could better appreciate the cultural icons but most of this is recognizable everywhere in the world.

Penelope says

I really liked this book...it has the perfect balance of humor and emotion. It had a plot and sort of seemed to make sense but it's also completely absurd and poetic. I definitely enjoyed the first half of the book the most. It took me forever to finish the second half--which was a problem, since this is the sort of book that's difficult to read in short sections. It's written in a stream-of-consciousness sort of way, with very few breaks or paragraphs, so it's hard to find a stopping place other than between chapters. I'd like to read this again sometime but would probably only re-read the first half of the book

Krtka says

This is the first book that I have read by this author. For a long time, I have had "I Served the King of England" on my wish list. I saw this book on sale and bought it as a substitute, and glad to have read it. I enjoyed this book a lot and found it more humorous than I anticipated from a translation. Uncle Pepin is a wonderful character, and the stories he relates are the kind you wish your own uncle would have told you, for e.g....

"And so Adolf had no luck in life, once he was passing this pub, and some drunken dentists were there, and they invited Adolf for a drink, and when he'd had some and was glad folks were being nice to him again, all of a sudden one dentist in a drunken stupor pulled out another dentist's front teeth, and seeing as Adolf was drunk too, the one that pulled out the front teeth took Adolf and pulled out all of his back teeth, mind you Adolf was dead lucky there was no drunken gelders around that night..."

The run-on sentences and lack of periods in punctuation are common in the book...not sure if that's a result of the translation, or the Czech, or just Hrabal's writing style. This took a bit of getting used to...

This book has been made into a movie, and I found it available for streaming on the Internet. Alas, it is in Czech and there are no subtitles, but watching just a bit led me to believe that it is true to the story line.

Joanna says

My temperament is: polite, observing, responsive, apologetic, irreverent but repressed. This book is: sharp and sensual, unapologetic, poetically forgiving, interested, a foil to my disengagement, sophisticated in its ability to navigate crude honesty. I skimmed through the book when maybe I should have courageously confronted the possibility of story, but my review is a reflection of my temperament and little more.

Spiros says

Two bits of fictionalized memoir revolving around Hrabal's family: "Cutting It Short", like Harlequin's Millions, is told from the standpoint of Maryska, the author's mother, "The Little Town Where Time Stood Still" is introduced by Hrabal as a child, getting the wrong tattoo in local tavern (he wanted a boat tattooed on his chest, he wound up with a risqué mermaid), but he quickly writes himself out of the story. The hero of both stories is Hrabal's Uncle Pepin, a blustery, hard-living cobbler, who comes to stay with his brother Francin and sister-in-law Maryska "for a fortnight", and winds up spending the next thirty years with them. Pepin jumps out of the page at us: he loves the society of disreputable women, he works hard at the most degrading of tasks, and like Svejek he is world-class palaverer. The only reservation I have with this book is that the translator saw fit to give Pepin a scot's accent, which is initially distracting; but Pepin is such an outsized character that one soon manages to take this in stride.

Ray says

This book comprises two linked novellas. They deal with life in a small town in interwar Czechoslovakia and the immediate aftermath of the Soviet takeover.

I like the warmth the writer has for the characters and the period - a world that is now irrevocably lost and a country that no longer exists. There are ominous undertones and the threat of danger during the German occupation and then the Soviet "liberation", but the overarching theme is that people make their accommodation with the powers that be and move on with the ebb and flow of their lives. So it goes.

The writing is a mix of sleepy hicksville interspersed with moments of slapstick and surreal joy - there is one episode about a chap running down the street with his purple painted genitals on display that makes me laugh even as I write about it.

Well worth a read

Czarny Pies says

This is a wonderful book about the former country of Czechoslovakia during the 1930s and post war years. . On each page Talleyrand seems to whisper into the reader's ear: "He who did not live in the years before the [dictator ship of the proletariat] cannot understand what the sweetness of living is. "

Live is wonderful indeed in the small town where Hrabal grew up. It was especially so for Hrabal, his father a brewer and his joyful mother. One cannot but help but be enchanted by the first half of the book where the author recounts his childhood idyll which vanishes with the Nazi invasion and which cannot return under soviet occupation.

The second half of the book is a very accurate description of how bourgeois elements in Czech society were stripped of their assets, their social prestige and their treasured memories. As such it is very useful to anyone living in the West who has heard of the phenomenon but has no ideas about how it worked in practice. Fortunately Hrabal takes enough pride in his father's actions during this terrible period that the warm glow from the first half of the book never leaves the reader's heart.

This is a great book for those friends or family that lived through the communist era in central Europe and wish to understand the experience better.

Vampire Who Baked says

This is just one of those books where the sparkling and stellar mixes with the dull and mundane, and at the end of your read you are wondering which of the two faces of the book you will remember more after you are done with the novel. Unfortunately, in my case it is the latter.

For me, Uncle Pepin is just mind numbingly dull writing. It works off a clichéd trope, that of the loud, rustic, temperamental but well-meaning buffoon with a heart of gold, and there is very little (apart from a bit of inspired courage towards the end) that strays from that trope. The translation does a dreadful job of giving him more life beyond a tired monolithic stereotype, and it does not help that a heavy Northern Hagrid-ish accent sounds absurd when attached to what is ultimately a Czech character. Perhaps it is one of those culture clashes that can never be resolved adequately, one of those very regional recurring motifs that is loved by people in the know, but does not have much appeal beyond its specific demographic.

Maryska on the other hand is just spectacularly written- every single paragraph where she describes her view of the world is classic Hrabal- a prototypical displacy of wit and creativity and childlike innocence, and that special Hrabal secret sauce that takes something that is usually considered gross and revolting in the real world and dresses it up in metaphor and imagination to convincingly display it as if it is made of glitter and fairy dust. The passages where she compares (and very persuasively) guts spilling out of a slaughtered pig to a display of Christmas lights is just sublime writing!

Overall, it's a book that contains passages I would read, again and again and again, and be delighted in new ways every single time, but most of the second half deals with the duller than ditchwater characters of Uncle Pepin and Francin, which I struggled to get through. Maybe I am missing something or haven't read it in the right way, but until I figure that out, two stars will have to do.

Corinne Wasilewski says

The sentences go on and on, sometimes for half a page and their structure is unwieldy (not sure if this is due to the Czech to English translation or simply the author's writing style--this is one of those questions that always arises when I'm reading a translation). The tone is definitely comic, but, the scenes tend toward slapstick and screwball comedy which are not my favourites by a long shot. Nevertheless, the narrative is just beautiful at times, including the opening pages and the nostalgic waxing for the past towards the end and because beautiful, insightful narrative covers a multitude of sins in my book, I'm going to overlook the slapstick and the clunky sentences and go with the three star rating.

Christopherseelie says

Two shorter novellas, companion pieces really, under one title. A great introduction by one of the Author's friends, who explains how the text was changed under various Neo-Stalinist dictates. The first story, called "Larks on a String", is surprising in that it is told from a female perspective. As far as I can tell, this is the only time Hrabal attempts this. I wonder why, because it strikes me as a successful venture.

Erica Hatch says

I read this book after hearing someone's raving recommendation about how beautiful the story was. I, apparently, REALLY missed something. I didn't like this book. The stories were odd, to say the least...and the sentences were incredibly long. I found myself drifting a lot or struggling to see the connection between the various chapters. Overall, I thought this book was just plain confusing.
