

Hakl, Emil. *Of Kids & Parents*. Trans. Marek Tomin. Prague: Twisted Spoon Press, 2008. 153 pp.

FEW Czech novels appear in English translation quickly enough to be deemed more or less current. Emil Hakl—whose novel *Of Kids & Parents* appeared in Czech in 2002, received one of the major Czech literary prizes for that year, and was recently turned into a motion picture—thus joins rarified company. Since several of the Czech authors whose work does appear regularly in English translation either no longer write in Czech, are beyond their prime, or arguably never had a prime, the appearance of interesting contemporary work from a younger generation (Hakl is around 50) in an elegant and readable translation is refreshing. Twisted Spoon Press deserves praise, and the trend deserves encouragement.

Perhaps inevitably, many English-language readers will be tempted to coordinate this novel with what they might know about or expect from Czech literature. Two such coordinates immediately stand out. First, much of the novel takes place in pubs, where an imposing amount of alcohol is consumed. The Czech literary fascination with the pub as public sphere in miniature, as arena of authenticity or exuberance, here finds its continuation. Second, Hakl constructs his novel almost entirely around dialogue and vibrant anecdotes, inevitably bringing to mind the famous ‘pábení’ or palavering that so fascinated the great Bohumil Hrabal. Both coordinates fit but easily become red herrings. Hakl does not so much engage with or expand upon these themes as take them for granted; they represent his starting point rather than his destination.

*Of Kids & Parents* is about a son in his early forties and a father in his early seventies who meet up for a long afternoon walk in Prague. (That the son-narrator’s

name is Jan Beneš, which is Emil Hakl's real name, reveals that much of the novel is openly autobiographical.) The meandering and often crude chat of father and son, as well as their occasionally sharp exchanges, parallels the overall structure of the novel: aside from the walk with no set destination and the regular stops for a shot or a beer at the next pub, the novel has no plot to speak of. But lack of plot does not mean poverty of narration, and the discontinuous anecdotes, memories, and observations of these two figures form a complex if only loosely coherent semantic web. Several of the themes one might expect from a father-son narrative do play important roles here: simultaneous intimacy and alienation; the disturbing discovery of repeating cycles of behavior; the sense of lost opportunities for communication; and the feeling that beyond all recrimination lies tolerance if not forgiveness. Uniting these themes is a general concern with aging and the confrontation it forces with who one is, where one has come from, and where one might have gone. Hakl's talent is to treat such themes with an extremely light touch. Only rarely does he skirt sentimentality or stiffness.

Yet the novel resonates with broader themes as well, although the subtlety of Hakl's narration makes those resonances difficult to describe. The dialogue between father and son moves fluidly from grievances about hemorrhoids to childhood memories to descriptions of atrocities during the Second World War—and back again. The sense of surprising connections between personal history and larger events, between intangible emotions and indifferent facts, is at the center of this novel. Those connections are not straightforward, and to Hakl's credit he does not attempt to impose 'deeper significance' onto the outwardly mundane. Rather Hakl is fascinated by the incongruous ways that significance brazenly appears in absurd places only to hide again shyly the next instant.

Marek Tomin's translation does a fine job in capturing the swift flights of Haki's prose between the sublime and the ridiculous, and ably meets some of the more unusual challenges of the text (such as translating the lingo of text messaging on a mobile phone). As a result, English-language readers have before them a novel both fascinating in its own right and demonstrating some of the more original facets of current Czech literature.

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