



# **Bohumil Hrabal**

## **Pirouettes on a Postage Stamp**

**AN INTERVIEW-NOVEL  
WITH QUESTIONS ASKED  
AND ANSWERS RECORDED  
BY LÁSZLÓ SZIGETI**

**TRANSLATED,  
WITH AN INTRODUCTION  
AND NOTES,  
BY DAVID SHORT**

# PIROUETTES ON A POSTAGE STAMP

**Bohumil Hrabal**

English translation by David Short

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I withdraw everything that I have ever said  
that was just to avoid my soul's damnation,  
to which I still don't have the key.

Bohumil Hrabal

## TRANSLATOR'S FOREWORD

BOHUMIL HRABAL (1914-97), the cat-loving, football-crazy, only semi-reconstructed beatnik, is gradually becoming familiar to the English-speaking reader,<sup>1</sup> as the author of bizarre (he would say, in many cases, grotesque) tales based on observation of everyday events and as the source of a number of screenplays.<sup>2</sup> Additional momentary notoriety accompanied the appropriately bizarre manner of his death – from falling out of his hospital window as he fed the pigeons.

Life, including the author's own, is at the heart of all his works. Thus many contain autobiographical elements, though it is not always possible to disengage them from the imaginative overlay. The present volume is unique amongst the works of Bohumil Hrabal in being overtly (auto-)biographical and, particularly, auto-philosophical. Its uniqueness also stems from its genre (he originally called it an 'interview-novel'; the 1996 Collected Works edition calls it merely a 'conversation', or 'dialogue'<sup>3</sup>) and from its being, in a sense, jointly authored (a feature which, though for different reasons and in different ways, it shares with *toto město je ve společné péči obyvatel*<sup>4</sup>).

Both the genre and the joint authorship make the present book reminiscent of Karel Čapek's *Hov-*

ory's *TGM*:<sup>5</sup> each is a cooperative effort between a 'celebrity' (the writer Hrabal and Czechoslovakia's first president T. G. Masaryk) and a recorder of their thoughts (the Slovak-Hungarian journalist László Szigeti and the writer Karel Čapek respectively). One difference is that while in each case it is the writer who appears as titular author, in Hrabal's he is the 'celebrity', while Čapek is the recorder. This itself is curious, and adds to the book's uniqueness in Hrabal's oeuvre, since, as he repeatedly maintains, here and elsewhere, he saw his own role to be that of a recorder, not writer. One 'creative' similarity<sup>6</sup> between the two is that just as Čapek pruned and edited the text several times, after Masaryk had made his amendments to the draft typescript,<sup>7</sup> so too Hrabal's thoughts, at first reading apparently verbatim, as if lifted straight from the tape-recording, were actually heavily edited (with omissions and some juggling) by Hrabal himself after he had seen Szigeti's second version of the transcript (the full process is described in 'PS 1' in the original).<sup>8</sup> In this respect *Pirouettes* is like most of his other works: he was notorious for, indeed made a virtue or principle of, cutting and reorganising his texts several times over, a practice to which he inevitably alludes in this conversation.

Since the text nevertheless retains the character of a more or less verbatim oral record, it is occasionally awkward to translate, being full of false starts, anacolutha, and thematic and syntactic digression; the latter would be doubtless included, with pride, among the author's 'pirouettes on a postage stamp'. The text is also very uneven in the way Hrabal's oral discourse



(in contrast to the more earnest Szigeti) is marked by code-switching (between an informal standard Czech and hypercolloquial forms – words and grammatical forms – more appropriate to Common Czech). And it is occasionally idiosyncratic in its vocabulary: no other late twentieth-century writer makes such regular use of the word *ludibrionism*, which will be seen to mean more than an indulgence in the *ludibrious* (which English dictionaries do recognise). The translation seeks to preserve as many of these characteristics as possible, so that it should still read as fairly informal, rather than having been beautified by editorial intervention. The original printed text is, however, particularly idiosyncratic in the use of punctuation and in this case I have, conversely, felt at liberty to do some minor reorganization here and there.

Hrabal's language generally is quite accessible. Apart from *ludibrionism*, the one Hrabalesque word *par excellence* is *pábení*, here left untranslated (though previous translators have used *palavering*). And a slight problem attaches to the title of the book – *Klíčky na kapesníku* in the original. *Klíčky* is a plural word referring to the bobs and weaves and tight manoeuvres that make up tackling and dribbling on the football pitch; as a plural form it carries with it the option of being used in the singular, as it occasionally is in the book. I have favoured the translation 'pirouette(s)', since that likewise refers to a motion of the whole body, and has been deemed appropriate enough by those who remember the footwork of the Hungarian footballer who first inspired the image for Hrabal; the expression is also not unknown in English football journalism.

(The ‘postage stamp’ of the translation replaces the ‘handkerchief’ of the original title as a more familiar English image of a confined space, and ‘Pirouettes on a postage stamp’ preserves the alliteration of the original title.) The literal sense of *klička* as ‘loop’ is, to the Czech mind, also associated with ‘bow’, or ‘knot’, hence when collocated with ‘handkerchief’ it may hint at the knots traditionally tied in handkerchiefs as an aide-mémoire – not inappropriate in a book consisting in the main of memoirs, though this other layer of meaning has not proved possible to conserve in the title of the translation.

The English-speaking reader might occasionally be thwarted by his ignorance of Czech literature, to which, unsurprisingly, Hrabal makes frequent reference. For that reason I have introduced footnotes, as economically as possible, to provide the minimum necessary background. I have used my judgement over the provision of sundry other footnotes, usually called forth by the need to explain some or other detail of Czech or Central European or other *realia* or cultural references that may be less familiar to at least some Anglo-Saxon readers. If it were thought that footnotes have no place anyway in a work which carries a sub-title containing the word ‘novel’, I would defend the practice on the grounds that, notwithstanding its literary form, unusual as it is, the work is none the less (auto-)biography and so non-fiction, and while readers of the original may have needed less editorial assistance, the reader from outside the Czech environment, especially one previously unacquainted with Hrabal, almost certainly does.<sup>9</sup> Similar grounds

have led me to provide an index of names and of literary and other works mentioned. For the reader with a prior interest in Hrabal, the latter should aid the search for some background to quite a number of his other works. This unique, and uniquely processed, biographical record should help any future readers of Hrabal in translation to gain a better understanding of the man and his philosophy. The text is a complete rendering of the first regularly published edition, minus two of the three postscripts ('PS 2' and 'PS 3' are also omitted from the text of the Collected Works edition<sup>10</sup>), despite their provision of some additional background on the work's genesis.

Most important here is the light the postscripts throw on the work's occasionally transparent Hungarian focus; if less well known in the Anglo-Saxon world, Hrabal was and is extremely popular in Hungary, and it was a Czechoslovak-Hungarian journalist who conceived the format of the book as a means to enhance further the Hungarian reading public's familiarity with an already familiar author. A previous Hungarian accolade, and a kind of *quid pro quo* for Hrabal's own acknowledged debt to the Hungarian playwright and short-story writer István Örkény, came with the publication of a book in which Hrabal's name figured in the title, namely Péter Esterházy's *Hrabal Könyve* (Budapest, 1990 – the very year in which *Pirouettes* appeared in regular printed form); this has appeared in English, as *The Book of Hrabal* (Budapest, London, 1993; trans. Judith Sollosy). It is a rambling novel in which the lives of a young intellectual

couple are (over-)shadowed by two members of the Hungarian security services in the guise of somewhat Rushdiesque ‘angels’; Hrabal, or his spirit, is the sounding-board or prop that helps the woman in particular, who is pregnant and in two minds as to whether to have an abortion, to retain her sanity.

Finally, it should be borne constantly in mind that the text arose before the ‘Velvet Revolution’ (the conversations took place in 1984–85). Thus any references of the ‘here’ and ‘now’ kind, such as the comments on the politics of publishing, apply to conditions in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic (1960–89).

David Short *Windsor, January 2007*

<sup>1</sup>For works previously translated see Miroslav Červenka *et al.*: *Sebrané spisy Bohumila Hrabala*, vol. 19, *Bibliografie, dodatky rejstříky*, Prague, 1997, pp. 276–78.

<sup>2</sup>Perhaps the best known films are *Cutting it Short* and *Closely Watched Trains*, though there have been others; some have been given an airing on British television, though well outside peak viewing times. A complete filmography is to be found in *ibid.* pp. 344–51).

<sup>3</sup>The ‘original’ sub-title applies to the first regularly published book edition (Prague: Práce, 1990). This was in fact preceded by a photocopied (*samizdat*) edition of thirteen copies taken from an amended typescript (Prague, 1987), of which the (deleted) sub-title had been *Rozhovory do autu* (approx. ‘Conversations across the touchline’, or ‘... out of play’ – a football metaphor). The Collected Works sub-title is, then, a compromise return to the original one, but totally lacking the sporting allusion of either of its predecessors. The text is there not merely described as a dialogue, but is fully type-set as one, with the alternating speakers given throughout, as in a play; the names are typeset as capitals, Sziget’s questions in italics. (See *Sebrané spisy Bohumila Hrabala*, Vol. 17 [ed. V. Gardavský, C. Poeta and V. Kadlec], Prague, 1996, pp. [5]–126.)

<sup>4</sup>‘this town is in the joint care of its inhabitants’ (the non-capitalisation of the first word of the title is deliberate). See my essay ‘Bohumil Hrabal and Fun with Montage: Aspects of *toto město je ve společné péči obyvatel*’, in *Bohumil Hrabal (1914–97): Papers from a Symposium* (ed. DS), London, 2004, pp. 59–81.

<sup>5</sup>See ‘Linguistic authenticity in Karel Čapek’s *Conversations with TGM*’, in David Short: *Essays in Czech and Slovak Language and Literature* (London, 1996, pp. 31–

49). The opening paragraphs include due reference to the pre-history of the genre, as represented notably by Plato and Goethe. The change of the present work's sub-title to 'dialogue' or 'conversation' is not without relevance here.

<sup>6</sup>There is also a *structural* similarity, in the inclusion of photographs, of Masaryk and Hrabal respectively. In *Pirouettes* these were by Tibor Hrapka, though they are not reproduced in the present version. They were the subject of 'PS 2', one of three 'appendices' to the original work; in it, Hrabal writes at length of this photographer's art as being like his own, a method of observing, cutting, selecting, rejecting, and he is plainly pleased with the outcome. Amongst other things he says: 'Tibor Hrapka often caught me in situations where I could not match up to my own photo, and where his photographs also had an extra half-dimension because in my civilian existence I [...] very much want to be as in a photograph... / For all that, Tibor Hrapka did capture me in several shots when I didn't know they were being taken, and so my mask, thanks to the alertness and artistry of the photographer, was remoulded into a human face.'

<sup>7</sup>See Čapek, *Čtení o TGM* (Prague, 1969).

<sup>8</sup>Hrabal might well have found this parallel, with both Čapek as fellow-writer and Masaryk as the celebrity in this type of Platonic dialogue, flattering – despite the ideological differences between them. Čapek's standing as a writer and gentleman is at least recognized in *Pirouettes*; Masaryk is mentioned just once, and then not by name, and only in the Čapek context. It is not inconceivable that Hrabal may have aspired to the standing with the readership (if not the establishment) of his own day that Čapek enjoyed in his and went along with Szigeti's project more willingly than his sometimes morose nature, and his avowed avoidance of fellow-writers, might suggest. His initial failure to win the approval of the (Communist) establishment for this book is apparent from the tenor of the anonymous reader's comments in the appraisal rejecting it on behalf of Československý spisovatel (see the 'Commentary' on the text in the Collected Works edition, p. 377).

<sup>9</sup>I have thought from the outset that an edited Czech edition of the work would not come amiss; the book has plenty of allusions which must escape the Czech reader, not to mention Hrabal's occasional factual slips, which might well go unremarked; I have sought to rectify those that I have identified.

<sup>10</sup>'PS 2' is included in Vol.18 of the Collected Works under its sub-title 'Mask and Face'; 'PS 3' is reproduced in the Collected Works edition of *Pirouettes*, but only as part of the critical apparatus (pp. 378–80).



*Mr Hrabal, when did you actually enter the world of books and literature?*

The first book I ever had was an ABC. After I learned to read I was given an odd sort of book called *Master Naughty Grows Up*.<sup>1</sup> It was a story about a repulsive, wicked little boy who finally grew up to be a good boy. I saw myself not as the good boy, but as Master Naughty; I must have liked the book though, because I've still got it at home. Nobody else read it, just me, and now it's all fallen apart.

*And who wrote Master Naughty?*

Some Czech writer. It was just an ordinary children's book, with pictures. But I was even more fascinated by Bible stories. Bible stories, from Adam and Eve right through to the birth of Christ and the conversion of

<sup>1</sup> Anon: *Z ledajáčka ledaják. Veselé, zároveň však poučné vypravování o ledajákovi Ivánkovi* (Master Naughty Grows Up. A jolly but improving tale about naughty little Ivan). Prague, 1915. Unpaginated (32p.). A large-format (in excess of A4) children's book with lots of pictures. The title is slightly misleading in that while baby naughty Ivan grows up first into big naughty Ivan, he is, finally, after many improbable and supernatural adventures involving a car-ride with a baron, a bizarre flight in a balloon and his rescue by a bunch of dwarfs, much improved; having politely thanked the dwarfs he returns home never to annoy his parents again.

Saul to Paul. I learned those stories by heart. And the third book that made me what I am was Sokol-Tůma's *From the Mills of Bohemia*,<sup>2</sup> tales about country-folk, life at the water-mill and in the village generally, and it was all so amazing. And of course, later on I read crime fiction – Leon Clifton, Nick Carter, or cowboy books – Buffalo Bill, Wild Bill Hickock and the rest. When I was in about the fifth grade, I was given a book by Florence Montgomery called *Misunderstood*.<sup>3</sup> It's an unbelievably awful book, and most certainly not for children, because Humphrey, he's forever misunder-

<sup>2</sup> Hrabal is mistaken at this point: the highly popular *Z českých mlýnů* referred to here is not by the moralizing, patriotic, anti-clerical and antisemitic František Sokol-Tůma (real name František Tůma, 1855–1925), one of numerous nineteenth and early twentieth-century Czech writers of conventional prose, also a playwright and journalist; it is in fact by Karel Tůma (1843–1917), a leading journalist (and long-term editor of *Národní listy*) and politician (MP for the National Party of Free-Thinkers). These humoresques, based on rural life and centred on the village mill, came out in numerous printings up to a total of eight volumes (1892–1917); a film was also made.

<sup>3</sup> Florence Montgomery (1843–1923), Victorian novelist, author of books for and about children, daughter of Admiral Sir Alexander Montgomery, 3rd Bt. The long (300p.) moral tale *Misunderstood* (1869) was extremely popular, despite being 'unbelievably awful': at least twenty-one editions appeared with Montgomery's original publisher (Bentley) up to 1887, with several more from MacMillan up to 1913, further English editions in the USA and Germany, and translations into several other languages, including Italian, Slovak (*Neporozumený*, trans. Margita Paulíny-Tóthová [1873–1948]) and Czech. The publishing history in Czech is not without interest, since its Victorian morality was obviously found 'useful' not only in pre-World War I Austro-Czech conditions, but was still felt worth republishing in pre-World War II Czechoslovakia, long after the last English edition. It first appeared, translated by Josefa Božena Koppová (d. 1917) under the title *Nepochopen* (1897) as a supplement to the Prague daily *Národní listy*. It was then retranslated ('from the 24th English edition') under the same title by Malvina Nekvindová-Nešporová (??–??) and published in book form in 1906; further editions appeared in 1916 and 1930. It is perhaps safe to assume that the wartime edition of the second translation was the version presented to Hrabal.



stood, even in his own family. I never read the book to the end, it always made me so sad. Today I realize that I too was a bit misunderstood, actually like most children; it hadn't been a mistake when they gave me it, but the book had a higher purpose that I've only learned to appreciate since. Although I've got the book, I still haven't dared to finish it, so the boy Humphrey lives on like me. It was only last year that I learned that my hero had almost drowned. That's right. But they dragged him from the water along with his little brother, who wasn't hurt, though Humphrey injured himself so badly falling out of a tree that he was crippled for life – and lost the will to live. Which is why he died so young.

*So you were magically drawn to mischief. But what mischief did you find in the Bible stories or the Tūma book?*

I was permanently drawn to the unfolding tales. They're sort of miniature short-stories. In those days we had RE at school, and I was amazed at these abridged versions of great events...

*And stories. But what did you get from those books in the way of ideas?*

Nothing at all. Fun. I've always treated literature as fun as well. One Christmas my uncle gave me a book by François Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, a Renaissance work. It's some nine hundred pages of very funny and highly intellectual narrative, larded with quotations from the ancient Greeks and Romans. And that's where I really learned *and* understood what quotation is about: simply being an educationist and

appealing to all the beautiful and meaningful things the past has to offer.

*I expect you were taken by the work's ethical novelty, the creed of ethics of Gargantua and Pantagruel: "Fais ce que tu veux!", that is, "Do as you like!", which radiates so strongly from your own books.*

You may be right. I know some sections by heart, and that Renaissance 'Bible' of François Rabelais is my second university. My *Magna Carta*... So up to the age of about twenty I would really read pretty well just for amusement, and always in bed with my cats. I used to go to bed early; it hadn't even started to go dark and I would already be in bed, reading, and the cats would be lying next to me, and I read the same things over and over again and they never failed to excite me. That's where the roots are. After twenty I began to appreciate just what books are, and what education is. Until I was twenty I was actually spiritually dead. I was always somewhere else. Even at school.

*What subjects did you fail?*

Czech, always. It's taken me until now to grasp what the pluperfect is.

*And what school was that at, primary or secondary?*

In Brno and Nymburk;<sup>4</sup> I was sort of thick. *Ignorantia*.

<sup>4</sup> Nymburk is a small country town about 30 miles east of Prague and the location of the brewery where Hrabal grew up (his father was the manager) and to which he constantly refers. In more recent times, the beers produced here were given names derived from the town's Hrabal 'heritage': generically Postřižinské

*What do you think is the value of reading in adulthood, adolescence and childhood?*

I would say that reading is part of how personality is formed. A child, the little child that still hasn't learned to read properly, gradually gains an overview through reading; it's a process of accretion, of getting to know the world about us. Gradually teaching you about the things that are there in school and in the wider world. The boys at school who were any good were always keen readers.

*And what about those teenage years, when you were incapable of studying?*

Of course, I did have that failing at secondary school of being incapable of studying. I couldn't even look at a textbook, it would send me into convulsions.

*Why?*

I don't know. The thing is, my book was everything outside.

*Were you a bright lad?*

Far from it; I was more the stupid kind, in my own way. One day, when I was in the fourth grade at primary school, some big girls from the fourth grade of the council secondary school came to fetch me and took

pivo (after *Postřížiny* 'Cutting it short', the semi-autobiographical story set around Hrabal's early life at the brewery, on which he will have much to say later in this book), Pepinova desítka (after Uncle Pepin), Francinův ležák (after Hrabal's father), and Zlatovar (after the colour of his mother's hair). Perhaps regrettably, the own-brand Nymburk beer marketed in the 1990s by the Sainsbury chain of supermarkets, was sold under the bland and anonymous label of 'Sainsbury's Czech pilsener'.