

Harlequin's Millions

By Bohumil Hrabal

Translated by Stacey Knecht from the Czech

Discussion Points/Questions:

1. Within the first sentence of *Harlequin's Millions* we are introduced to the theme of time: "Just outside the little town where my time stood still is a small castle, and in that castle is now a retirement home." In the second clause of this sentence are juxtaposed the past and present uses of a building, showing a change brought about by time. Nonetheless, in the first clause we are given a location in which time seems to hold no effect: it stands "still." The wrought-iron clock in the castle, stuck at seven twenty-five, seems to further emphasize this latter idea. In what ways does time seem to have ceased flowing in this novel? What aspects of the narrator's life, mentality or environment seem immune to the passing of days? And oppositely, how does the movement of time leave traces in the city, the retirement home, and the landscape; in society and mores; and in the narrator and those around her?

In chapter 14 the narrator notices "how times had changed" in her "little town where time stood still." Is this a recognition that her former idea of the immobility of time is false? Or has the narrator simply developed a different sense of her life's and the world's temporality? Finally, what is the narrator's relationship to the distant past – that of the former castle and that of the history of the town as told by the "three witnesses to old times"? How real are these stories she hears and in the end she herself recounts about the past? What effect might either real or fictionalized history have on the present?

2. The narrator often recalls how when young she was the beauty of the town. Now past the threshold of old age, this former beauty of hers has disappeared, leaving her wrinkled and toothless. Yet in a gesture of situational irony, the narrator finds herself at this stage of life in a castle decorated with swirling frescos and sculpted nudes baring perfect bodies. What differences and similarities are there between the fleeting yet human beauty of the narrator in her youth, and the immortal yet impersonal beauty of the statues and the figures represented on the ceiling? What emotions do the frescos and statues instill in the narrator? And how does the narrator's experience with the paintings and statues compare to the near bacchic frenzy inspired by Doctor Holoubek's classical music in chapter 10? In chapter 13 the narrator discovers that many of the statues were damaged in drunken bouts of shooting, their missing body parts later replaced by cement. Though the narrator claims she first was "shocked" at learning this, she then states that because of their imperfections these statues "seemed even more beautiful to me than before." What is the relationship in this novel between beauty and perfection, or between beauty and vulnerability? Aside from the castle and its decorations, is there a certain beauty to this retirement home, where mortality is set in relief?

3. The lives of the narrator and her husband seem punctuated by failed plans and unaccomplished dreams. The narrator's store in Prague closes down in a pile of debt, the husband discovers he is unable to withdraw from his life insurance investment, both of their comfortable lives in the brewery are brought to a close by the new regime, their new house on the river is poorly designed and shaken by a malevolent wind. What forces cause these dreams to remain unfulfilled? Are these failures tragically outside the control of the narrator and her husband, or are they brought about by a lack of foresight and intelligence? How do these hopes become extinguished or continue to survive once the narrator and Francin are in the retirement home? In the very last chapter the narrator states that after her first visit she "dreamed of the retirement home" and "wanted more than anything to live there." However, her "true story" is that she left the brewery and moved into her windy and desolate "villa on the Elbe." How much of the narrator's relation of her stay in the retirement home is only the creation of a dream? What is this connection between unfulfilled desires and the fabrication of fiction?

4. The "soft melody of Harlequin's Millions" drifts constantly through the air of the old castle turned retirement home. What effect does this song have upon the pensioners and the narrators? What might the fact that it originates from the romantic scenes of silent movies say about its role in the novel? Is the sweetness of the music simply a pleasant background accompaniment, or is it in some way creating a false atmosphere of happiness – or is it perhaps doing something else entirely? One might also compare this ubiquitous tune to the dangerous power of Doctor Holoubek's classical music. Why might Hrabal have chosen to name the novel after this song? The narrator furthermore describes how the pensioners immediately become anxious when one of the rediffusion boxes turns off, even though they otherwise do not seem to notice the presence of this song. What else is there in this novel, and perhaps in our own lives, of which only the cessation draws attention?

Suggestions for Further Reading & Exploration:

Online:

Visit the [online site of Hospital Kuks](#), erected by Count Franz Anton von Sporck in 1695.

Read James Wood's [review of Bohumil Hrabal's life and works](#) in the *London Review of Books*.

Read a [review of Hrabal's *I Served the King of England*](#) in *The Guardian*, in which Hrabal's life and philosophy are also discussed.

Look through a [short history of the Czech region](#).

In Print:

Sayer, Derek. *Prague, Capital of the Twentieth Century: A Surrealist History* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2013). Sayer examines how the 20th-century history of Prague is representative of the political and cultural forces that shook the rest of Europe during this era. Looking at everything from buildings to films to exhibitions, through Prague Sayer examines what it means in Europe to be modern.

Sophocles. *Oedipus at Colonus*. Translated by Eamon Grennan and Rachel Kitzinger (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004).

Other books in English by Bohumil Hrabal:

Closely Watched Trains. Translated by Edith Pargeter (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1995).

Dancing Lessons for the Advanced in Age. Translated by Michael Heim (New York: New York Review Books, 2011).

The Death of Mr. Baltisberger. Translated by Michael Heim (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 2010).

Gaps: A Novel. Translated by Tony Liman (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 2011).

In-House Weddings (Writings from an Unbound Europe). Translated by Tony Liman (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 2007).

I Served the King of England. Translated by Paul Wilson (New York: New Directions, 2007).

Too Loud a Solitude. Translated by Michael Heim (Boston: Mariner Books, 1992).

Vita Nuova: A Novel. Translated by Tony Liman (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 2010).

Movie Adaptations:

Closely Observed Trains. Directed by Jiří Menzel (The Criterion Collection, 1966).

I Served the King of England. Directed by Jiří Menzel (Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2008).