

# Rag-and-bone men

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Peter Krištúfek

THE HOUSE OF THE DEAF MAN

Translated by Peter Sherwood and Julia Sherwood

629pp. Parthian. Paperback, £10.99.

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Hadrien Laroche

ORPHANS

Translated by Jan Steyn

133pp. Dalkey Archive. Paperback, £10.95.

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In Peter Krištúfek's *The House of the Deaf Man* (*Dom hluchého*, 2012), Adam Trnovský returns to his childhood home after his father's death to empty it of the hoarded belongings of previous generations. Nostalgia prompts him to unearth a time capsule he buried in childhood, but instead the soil yields human bones and the questions of whose they are and how they came to be there. Hadrien Laroche's *Orphans* (*Les Orphelins*, 2005) also features a restless corpse. In its first section, we are introduced to Hannah née Bloch, a character whose eccentricities are attributed to the death of her Jewish father in unspecified circumstances during the Second World War: a dead man who can't be buried, and whose loss can't be properly mourned. Krištúfek and Laroche are each preoccupied by rituals of memory, the task of managing material remains, and the ineluctable legacies of the twentieth century – and of parents who lived through it.

In Krištúfek's novel, dealing with the memory of Adam's father becomes a reckoning with Slovak history. Alongside furniture and his ashes, his father has left traces in the Communist state security archives, forcing Adam to reassess his childhood, and the compromises and evasions necessitated by the vacillations of political regimes. Adam is born into a fictitious small town in Czechoslovakia in 1933. His family and their acquaintances represent the *mélange* of coexisting cultures and languages – Jewish, German, Hungarian, Czech, Polish, Slovak – inherited from the Austro-Hungarian Empire: “a proper Central European *cuvée*”. He experiences the annexation of Czechoslovakia by Germany in 1938; Slovakia's first period of independence during the Second World War as a Nazi puppet regime; the National Uprising of 1944; Communist rule from 1948; the liberalization of the 1960s; the Russian invasion of 1968; the Velvet Revolution of 1989; and, from 1993, Slovakia's second period of independence. It's little wonder that in his father's house “every clock . . . shows a different time”. While some characters sink in these tidal changes, others recur like bobbing corks, floating whatever the shift of the political current. Each change demands a rewriting of history and an erasure of the previous regime's ideological preoccupations. Krištúfek is interested in the corresponding effect on biography, and in how fiction can counter, or simply render, the self-inconsistency, revision and suppression demanded by each *volte-face*. The father's increasing deafness, which gives the book its title, is paralleled by Krištúfek's indictment of a nation that refuses to hear: deafness, he claims, is the national trait.

The novel's acknowledgements thank a long list of people for collecting “anecdotes and facts from the period”, and the whole reads as a scrapbook of oral history, rendered in an appropriately colloquial translation by Julia and Peter Sherwood. The result is a blend of narrative vignettes, loose ends and inconsistency, which deviates from clear storytelling. The discovery of unidentified bones sounds like the premiss for a historical thriller, but such sustained suspense is only an occasional thread.

Laroche's much shorter book comprises three sections, each of which describes a literal or metaphorical

orphan: the daughter of Central European Jews, raised in exile; a woman trapped in an impossible house designed by her dead father, who suffers from an “orphan” (or rare) disease; a cousin, in a Hamlet-like huff, whose “anti-parent project” is to disinherit his mother and father. Laroche, one of Jacques Derrida’s last students, imbues his tales with dream-like imagery and psychoanalytic resonances. The structure and effaced narrative voice owe something to W. G. Sebald, about whom Laroche has written. He shares with Sebald a concern for the pressure of the unacknowledged past on the present, though without the extraordinary echo chamber of style and image in Sebald’s novels, despite Jan Steyn’s fluid translation.

Both Laroche and Krištúfek, then, focus on characters who have “lost” their parents, yet whose patterns of existence are determined by them. And both find metaphors for this predicament in grotesque images of waste and recycling: the medical reuse of body parts (Krištúfek); a jar into which Laroche’s first orphan puts cooking scraps, allowing them to putrefy into a foul vinegar; the removal of limescale (Laroche); the scavenging of scrap metal (both). Matters of household management here become psychological and political – and dealing with history’s legacies a kind of family romance.

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