

Hell in a handcart

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Published: 21 January 2011

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SAMKO TÁLE'S CEMETERY BOOK

Translated by Julia Sherwood 130pp. Garnett Press. Paperback, £8.99.

978 0 9535878 9 6

Samko Tále is a physically and mentally stunted forty-three-year-old resident of the Slovak border town of Komárno, who supplements his disability pension by collecting cardboard and is writing a “book about a cemetery” because an alcoholic at the station pub predicted it. His eddying stream of consciousness takes in his grandmother’s wartime acquisition of Jewish property (“why would Jews need things like a piano in a concentration camp, right?”), the Communist period and postindependence Slovakia. A bestseller in Slovakia since its publication in 2000, Daniela Kapitánová’s satire epitomizes both the Central European fascination with the madness of conformism and the specifically Slovak attempt not to explain it, but to capture its voice.

Samko’s voice is parodically uneducated, marked by amusing malapropisms, misused bureaucratic jargon and verbal tics. His apparently rambling, repetitive narration, imitating his circuits of the town, suggests another picaresque trawl through Central European history; critics frequently compare Samko to Günter Grass’s “insane dwarf” Oskar in *The Tin Drum*, though Bohumil Hrabal’s small, amoral storyteller in *I Served the King of England* is closer. In fact - as the translator Julia Sherwood suggests by rendering Samko’s vehicle as a “handcart” - the reader, with each experience of *déjà vu*, passes through the circles of hell. Observing people on his rounds, Samko notes behaviour that he considers to be against “the law” and reports it to the “High-Ups”, as he has done since his schooldays under Communism. Kapitánová’s subsequent novels have been crime fiction; here too the reader becomes a detective, reading between the lines each time a story is repeated, slowly uncovering what has actually happened and the role played, apparently unwittingly, by Samko.

Liberal Slovak readers in the early years of the twenty-first century saw Samko as a typical supporter of the post-independence, chauvinist nationalist government, which presented itself as the guardian of Slovak tradition and morality and appealed to those who were nostalgic for the clarity and order of the Communist period. But, although Kapitánová persuasively captures Samko’s unashamed racism, his homophobia and love of the old regime, she also mocks the politically correct reaction of a visiting American teacher to Slovak “Romaphobia”. *Samko Tále’s Cemetery Book* may therefore be read more generally as an attack on ignorance and wilful naivety and those who promote them. The “cemetery” may be Komárno or Slovakia, or a Western civilization of “dead souls”, hollow shells of received opinion. Sherwood’s translation, like the original, makes for a swift, intense, thought-provoking novel, punctuated by laughs, gasps and perhaps tears.