

Book Review: Pavol Rankov's It Happened on the First of September (Or Some Other Time)

trans. Magdalena Mullek,

(Bloomington: Three String Books, 2020), 265 pp.

By Elizabeth J. Stigler, Ph.D.

Before the novel begins the headnote sets a curious tone which reads as follows: “All of the characters in the novel *It Happened on the First of September (Or Some Other Time)* are fictitious. First they lived in the times and place as described in the novel, and then the author invented them. Everything is invented. Nothing ever was, no one ever lived. There never has been a first of September.” Those few brief sentences set up the dynamic that will unfurl and contract, circle back on itself, and tie its characters in knotty entanglements over the course of the next 265 pages.

As indicated in the title, the story uses the annual first of September to mark the passage of time in the lives of its characters. Rather than divide the novel into chapters, author Pavol Rankov has labeled sections as ‘Episodes’—many of which feel like intimate vignettes—with the first entitled ‘Episode 1938.’ This episodic structure takes us all the way through 1968, as stated in the book’s subtitle ‘A Historical Novel from 1938-1968.’ The use of the term ‘Episode’ as opposed to ‘chapter’ emphasizes that time itself is a main character in this story and that each of these yearly episodes are only glimpses into the lives of the four people whose relationships to themselves, each other, and the world unfolds over thirty years of Septembers. Given the surrealist rhetoric of Rankov’s headnote—“Everything is invented. Nothing ever

was, no one ever lived.”—I was continually pulled to a more colloquial definition of ‘episode’ which denotes a mental break from reality where the person experiencing the ‘episode’ has trouble discerning ‘reality’ from ‘fantasy.’

Knowing that the story takes place between the years of 1938 and 1968 predisposes the reader to ominous feelings of foreboding that loom large before we meet the characters and enter their world. Anyone who is familiar with the basics of central European history knows that those three decades were some of the most tumultuous in the history of the region, and it is hard not to prematurely brace yourself for the tragedies that will most certainly befall the characters and their communities. While an existing awareness of major historical events of the period is useful, it is not a prerequisite to understanding or enjoying this book. With a balanced approach and command of historical narrative, Rankov guides readers through the contours of the Nazi invasion of Poland and the region’s entry in World War II, the rise of the Communist Party via a successful coup, the attempted revolution in Budapest in 1956, finally concluding with the Prague Spring and arrival of the Warsaw Pact troops. While these major chronological markers guide us through the story, it is the intimate details of the lives of four friends—and the passage of time—that fully immerses the reader in a richly woven narrative.

When the story opens, we meet Jan, Gabriel, Peter, and Maria; a group of friends enjoying the last days of summer at Levice’s public swimming pool—hence the cover image. Just barely entering their teenage years and raging with hormones, Jan, Gabriel, and Peter decide to have a swimming contest to determine which of them will earn the right to ask Maria out on a date, but just as a winner is about to be crowned, the race is disrupted when an unsuspecting patron obstructs the racing path. The device of the interrupted (or otherwise delayed) swimming contest animates the entire story and is a useful vehicle for illustrating the old adage about best laid plans.

It is not only plans that are constantly being disrupted, but the characters themselves who repeatedly fracture their identities into segments that fit the needs and boundaries of specific personal and political circumstances. Though all of the friends grew up and begin the story in Levice, Jan is Czech, Peter is Hungarian, and Gabriel is Jewish and while united by their common identity as Slovaks, the novel consistently illuminates the political and social machinations of the middle 20th century that worked to divide and conquer friends and neighbors through an exploitation of socially constructed difference. Names and identities shift in order for each character to navigate the contours of ever-changing political, military, and social structures—some more successfully than others.

One of the most compelling features of this novel is Rankov’s command of time and the construction of time as an active, if intangible participant. Moving as the story does through three decades means that we, as readers, come in and out of each character’s life, like drifting in and out of rooms in a large home. The progression of years seems to be accelerated as the characters age, a phenomenon those of us over 30 can surely relate to. What is also interesting is that way in which characters lose time; to their own self destructive behavior, their career ambitions, or their fervent

allegiance to a political party that turns out to be manipulative and exploitative. Despite their sweeping movements across countries, oceans, professions, and political parties, the core of the story sees these four characters consistently returning to each other, bound by complicated, and not always healthy, feelings of love. We see how lives constrained by forces larger than individual agency can still bloom and flourish even in the midst of dramatic social and political upheaval.

It is that tension between constraint and freedom, reality and fantasy, the plans you made for your life and the life that you end up living that makes this such a compelling read. It is not a simple feat to cover such a large expanse of time from the intimate perspective of four lives, but Rankov does it with ease. Equal measure historical narrative and engrossing fiction, *It Happened on the First of September (Or Some Other Time)* is a vibrant epic that you won’t be able to put down. ♦

