

Brenner

Hermann Burger

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Hermann Burger's *Brenner* is an autobiographical novel about childhood traumas and the pleasures of smoking a cigar.

Hermann Arbogast Brenner is the heir to a Swiss tobacco empire who is approaching his own end. Wrapping up his affairs, Brenner drives in his newly purchased sports car to visit friends in the Swiss countryside. He wants to talk about life while also smoking his way through a case of cigars.

In a mocking celebration of Marcel Proust and his madeleine cookie-triggered involuntary memory, Brenner chooses which cigar to smoke in the hope of conjuring a particular event. He only starts reminiscing after the cigar is lit. Each chapter focuses on a specific cigar; some brands are real, others the imaginary products of Brenner's company. The characteristics of each cigar are extolled before it is lit: Brenner compares them to women, life, the theater, and expressions of the human condition.

The memories conjured unfold similarly to how the cigar being smoked develops its "pneuma," an Ancient Greek word for breath that Brenner appropriates to describe his experience. Among the memories that are conjured, Brenner revisits his complicated relationship to his parents, the bullying he endured during a traumatic stay at a children's home, the significance of his favorite toy car, and the challenges of building a career while suffering from depression.

Brenner comes with a translator's afterword, wherein the challenges of translating Burger's prose are discussed, and suggestions for reading the text are given. The translation is excellent: it keeps the meandering sentences under control, solves the problems posed by the idiosyncrasies of Swiss German, and maintains Burger's voice.

Complicated but rewarding (just like a fine cigar), the novel *Brenner* takes its time to get to where it is going.

ERIKA HARLITZ KERN (July / August 2022)

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