

Keeping Bedlam at Bay in the Prague Cafe

M. Henderson Ellis

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John Shirting is a young man on a mission: it's the early 1990s and he wants to open a branch of Capo Coffee Family in Prague. Shirting considers himself a master of the espresso machine who instinctively times a shot to an exact twenty-one-second pull. But despite his superior skills as a barista, his inability to work well with others caused trouble within the coffee corporate offices in Chicago—and it will again.

Prague is a city in transition, the nucleus of a vibrant expatriate scene, but the quixotic Shirting is not a man of his time. He pops pills to ward off the “dark bile” and fears catching the plague in Prague’s twisted alleys. He assumes his room is bugged and refuses to believe the revolution is over. When he befriends a young prostitute and she questions him about whether he wants sex, he thinks she’s asking about socks.

Yet when it comes to coffee, Shirting is all business. Despite having been laid off, he still feels part of the Capo Coffee Family. He repeatedly writes the corporate office to suggest they expand their business into Eastern Europe and even develops a drink—coffee with vodka—to help localize the menu.

Although by nature a loner, Shirting is thrown together with a comic cast of characters: a former classmate, now a socialist who specializes in women named Lenka; three expats starting a pornography business; Golem hunters; and an artist who paints still lifes of cold cuts. The writing is sharp and consistently funny. But unlike other naïve literary characters, from Don Quixote to Forrest Gump, Shirting does not inadvertently disburse wisdom or save lives. The story remains dark, and comic situations run together without redemption.

M. Henderson Ellis spent several years in Prague during the early 1990s. He currently lives in Budapest, where he edits the English-language literary journal *Pilvax* and is a freelance editor. This is his first novel.

Keeping Bedlam at Bay in the Prague Cafe is a coming-of-age story about coffee and capitalism—which may be the same thing in this novel. The citizens of Prague are hoping to cash in on the new society, and expats are looking for a quick buck. Through it all, John Shirting seeks to bring coffee, in a distinctive branded paper cup, to the masses.

KAREN ACKLAND (Spring 2013)

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