ForeWord Reviews

LITERARY

The Guinea Pigs
Ludvik Vaculik
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"There are more than a million people living in the city of Prague whom I'd just as soon not name here," *The Guinea Pigs* begins. "Our family is originally from the country. Our family, that means me, my wife, and two tolerable little boys." These first sentences are a good introduction to the novel. The anonymous narrator is certainly not concerned with anyone else, or even overly so with his family, who, as his word choice suggests, he finds anything but tolerable.

Written in 1970, *The Guinea Pigs* is a strange and compelling existential novel. The book is narrated as an open letter to future generations by a bank clerk at the State Bank in Prague, a man who alternately cares for and threatens his family, inflicting random punishments on his two young sons and alienating his wife. The family adopts a pair of guinea pigs, with whom the narrator becomes unhealthily obsessed. He begins staying up late at night to observe their behavior and test their responses to his affections and punishments. When one of his pets falls ill, the narrator is more concerned with curing the guinea pig and continuing his research than he is when one of his sons is hospitalized at the same time.

The author will draw comparisons to Prague's most celebrated literary son, and the clerk's situation at the bank is certainly Kafkaesque. All the clerks in the State Bank steal regularly from their cash drawers, and are just as regularly caught each night by the guards who search them on their way out and take their cut. This practice is to be expected, and not stealing would be seen as dishonest—as having something to hide. But the balance between the bank, the clerks, and the guards is upset when it is revealed that the confiscated money is not being returned at all, and has not been put back into circulation. This revelation has the potential to wreck the entire economy.

At times the novel is frighteningly claustrophobic, with a cast that includes only a handful of characters. But Vaculik can be playfully postmodern as well, as when the narrator briefly adopts the third-person voice to recount particularly important moments.

"I started to write this book in my own person, because I thought it would be a book about the fact that we've got guinea pigs, and how we observe them and how they amuse us," the author writes before the shift into third-person, "At Christmas time, no one could have guessed where it would all end." This is true of *The Guinea Pigs* as well, and is part of the novel's appeal. With a narrator as likely to coddle his guinea pigs as he is to strike a family member, the warning of impending financial disaster, a hidden conspiracy at the bank, and a great foreboding hanging over the novel, the reader often keeps going just to see what, if anything, the author is going to make of this. In the end he is rewarded with a conclusion that justifies this dread, if not entirely explaining it.

Michael Beeman