

The Measure of the World

Charles Davis

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Charles Davis's eccentric, droll historical novel *The Measure of the World* has the establishment of the metric system at its core, and it proves perilous to seek standardization when most regard surveying with suspicion.

Jacques-François—a self-proclaimed imbecile who aspires to be a savant—is a surveyor helping to remeasure the Paris meridian. This compact and bawdy story is written as though it were Jacques-François's memoir, and is set during the French Revolution. Through recollections of villagers who view Jacques-François's work as evidence of spying, sorcery, thievery, or government interference, the period is captured with appealing wryness.

Humor stems from the discrepancy between Jacques-François's idealistic, youthful rationality and the skeptical, angered responses that the meridian project incites. But Jacques-François is aware of his own shortcomings, and he finds that the villagers, for all of their wariness and ignorance, possess their own wisdom when it comes to the land.

Keen perceptions pierce through an otherwise lighthearted, madcap tale of small-town behavior and narrow escapes. In Tauzet, where Jacques-François takes up lodging in a local family's household, he finds unexpected love. His conviction that he's a "connoisseur of absurdity" is proven time and again through tense situations, including a duel whose protocols are thwarted. A few moments are born out of dark circumstances, but the book is far from harsh.

In its finer reflections, the novel's ideas morph into a skillful examination of people's values; lives that map onto a world that is more vast than science can explain; and the nature of writing and storytelling, often seen in quotable sections. Writing, as Jacques-François comes to realize, is all about thinking, and this depiction of a lesser-explored topic is an entertaining sojourn.

KAREN RIGBY (July/August 2019)

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