



The Wooden King

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Viktor Trn has “the talent of the historian. To drag up the past from its forgotten and stinking grave and put the gore on display so it paralyzes the future.” Unmoved by high-flown arguments, Trn knows that history is for survivors, regardless of their stance or side. He finds himself a noncombatant in the occupied Czech Republic for the duration of World War II. A relentless dirge and a fierce lament, *The Wooden King* challenges the “good war” narrative in favor of a raw, personal interrogation that’s both visceral and ambivalent.

Trn believes war will pass and peace will come again; he knows there’s always an aftermath, regardless of the victor. Hemmed in by this philosophy, Trn is trapped, mostly in a small apartment with his increasingly unhappy wife, collegial father-in-law, and young son, Aleks. Thus, Trn’s war elapses in a long, isolated present, not quite connected to either the future or the past.

Anchored by his singular affection for his son, Trn survives. Moments between him and Aleks are bright—walks to and from school; poring over maps at home—amidst Trn’s limited motivations, unexpressed longings, and increasing interpersonal and relationship strife. Occupied life is otherwise a matter of horrific monotony and monotonous horror. The novel’s measured, observational pace runs away in a denouement that’s almost grotesque in its pathos as players are swiftly removed from the board.

The Wooden King takes a bold stance. Its myopic personal focus emphasizes a certain futility to individual lives, as well as the callousness of history, especially in matters that smack of *pro patria mori*. As the close confines of Trn’s domestic sphere become the stage on which morality, patriotism, and military action play out, survival—not heroism—becomes everything and nothing.

LETITIA MONTGOMERY-RODGERS (March/April 2018)

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