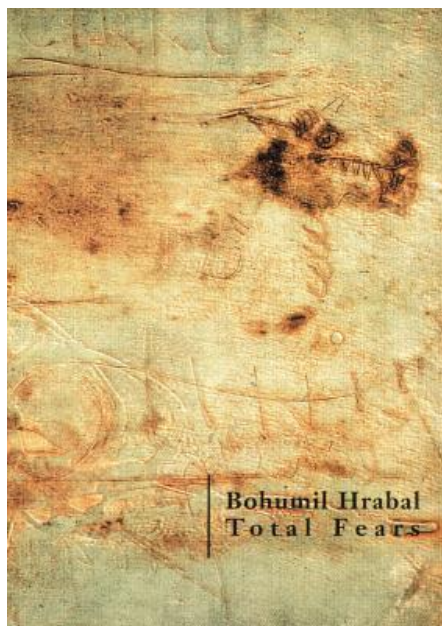




Total Fears: Selected Letters to Dubenka

Bohumil Hrabal , James Naughton (Translator)

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In these letters written to April Gifford between 1989 and 1991 but never sent, Bohumil Hrabal (1914-1997) chronicles the momentous events of those years as seen, more often than not, from the windows of his favorite pubs. In his palavering style that has marked him as one of the major writers and innovators of post-war European literature, Hrabal gives a humorous and at times moving account of life in Prague under Nazi occupation, communism, and the brief euphoria following the revolution of 1989 when anything seemed possible, even pink tanks. Interspersed are fragmented memories of trips taken to Britain — as he attempted to track down every location mentioned in Eliot's "The Waste Land" — and the United States, where he ends up in one of Dylan Thomas's haunts comparing the waitresses to ones he knew in Prague. The result is a masterful blend of personal history and poetic prose.

Total Fears: Selected Letters to Dubenka Details

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Download and Read Free Online Total Fears: Selected Letters to Dubenka Bohumil Hrabal , James Naughton (Translator)

One of the saddest books I've ever read, the memoir of an old drunk who happened to be a great writer. It's the liveliest extremely sad book I've ever read. It's a mishmash of memories of a long, eventful life, literary and otherwise. There's nothing like it.

Amazing humor amidst all the bitter realities he brings forth. Hrabal seems so cold and yet so emotional, so bitter and yet so funny, and the way he moves from serious matters into banal issues, into pure nonsense and comes back, the way he takes you along with him...

Eye opening, with all the similarities one can find in his and other artists' situation in the time of dictatorship with ours, not that ours is dictatorship... and making you somehow hopeful, that one day there might come an end...

[illegible]

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Spiros says

I needed something to take with me to the beach, as I was just finishing re-reading THE WAY WE LIVE NOW, so I picked up this cheery tome of epistolary essays written preceding and during the Velvet Revolution, the end of Soviet hegemony in Czechoslovakia during the late 1980's. Wonderful stuff, full of dread and deep humor, especially those pieces describing Bohumil's speaking engagements in the US and the UK.

Unfortunately, half way through the book I set it down on or near the buy counter at work, and odds are I'll never see it again. City Lights hadn't gotten in another copy when last I checked.

HAPPY ENDING! So, I showed up to work after my weekend, and one of my wonderful co-workers had found my copy of this book for me. I celebrated by reading it through from the beginning. Great stuff, well worth savoring. I take a foolish, parochial pride in Hrabal's constant references to Dubenka's "San Francisco" (April Gifford, whom Hrabal addresses as Dubenka, was in fact a graduate student at Stanford, but why split hairs?), including this astonishingly ingenuous quote: "I suppose London must be just as colorful a City as your own San Francisco, Dubenka, but the chill of the place enhances the nip of the colours, wherever you look Impressionist canvases just leap out at you, the soaring expressivity forces you to wipe your eyes, the dazzle gives you conjunctivitis, reflexes of colour and light, closing and opening of windows, like the welding of a steel track..."

Stephen says

These never sent letters end up being an autobiography never told to Hrabal's friend April from the 'Delighted States.' Both sad and beautiful, Hrabal comes off as one of the characters in his novels, which means that this collection of letters is more entertaining than your average -or even your better collections of

letters. Told in his flowing meter and grandfatherly way, Hrabal recalls his botched trip to the states, his driving around London trying to follow the narrative of T.S. Eliot's 'The Wasteland', and some of the most grimly-angelic references to his wife as a pigeon. Also, Hrabal foreshadows his own death from falling out of a fifth story window which is the fate, he argues, of all the great writers. Hrabal has a way of taking the ugly in the world, the regret or the blood on his pillowcase, or life behind the iron curtain and the paranoia of being questioned by the secret police, and turning it into something more beautiful than sunsets and daisies, and still at the same time bringing the humor of a Chaplin film.

Maria says

I love Hrabal, and this book of never-sent letters is stunning, heart-breaking, elegiac, suicidal, drunken all at once.

Pat Olvera says

The old man had a spirit up until he passed. He found life & inspiration in the revolution. Fun read for any fan of his & Czech Lit. Recommend "Closely Observed Trains" or "I Served The King of England" first.

Jeroen says

It would be difficult to be a Central European writer in the twentieth century and write in disregard of history as it continuously unfolds around you. For most of the great literature that has been written about the wars that tore Europe apart and the regimes that subjugated all those proud European peoples to all of those well-documented horrors, the main goal has been to somehow be able to convey the unspeakable tragedies that transpired, to spell it all out and relate it life-size, so as we never forget. In the oeuvre of the Czech writer Bohumil Hrabal on the other hand, I get almost the opposite sense. Not, of course, that he is reducing or naysaying or even ignoring what has happened, but he is trying to make it manageable; he is trying not to write about it, but *through* it. Hrabal as he portrays himself in these fake-ish memoirs, is not a hero of the resistance. He is simply a man living under a totalitarian regime, an artist who sees his expressive possibilities limited. I remember Josef Skvorecky in his *The Engineer of Human Souls* describing Hrabal as being "as closely watched as his trains", and in *Total Fears* we get a little insight into what that entailed precisely. As opposed to the protagonists of his *Closely Watched Trains*, Hrabal does not trip clumsily into a desperate act of rebellion. He is simply a man afraid, trying to manoeuvre his way through the mazes and mousetraps of East Bloc politics. The Albanian writer Ismail Kadaré once said, after being castigated for not taking a firm stance against the Hoxha regime, that he himself never claimed to be an "Albanian Solzhenitsyn": "Dissidence was a position no one could occupy, even for a few days, without facing the firing squad," Kadaré opined. Whether this was actually the case or not, it is surely silly to divide writers labouring under restrictive regimes into heroes and zeroes based on how vocal they were in their opposition. Kadaré continued to say that surely his opposition was ultimately reflected in his work, and Hrabal could make a similar claim (though thankfully he does not feel obliged to). "I wouldn't swap that signature on 'A Few Sentences' [an anti-regime petition] for eighty thousand copies of *Too Loud a Solitude*", Hrabal notes, and he just might have a point here. Maybe getting that book actually out there could have ultimately meant more to the Czech people than his one signature.

I think Hrabal shows very well here the machinations of the Western press, for whom every Czech writer

around this time had to be seen in the terms of the great Václav Havel, and the other Charter 77 artists. Hrabal goes on tours through the US (or the “Delighted States”, as the American student of Czech to whom these letters are addressed mistranslated the name into Czech) and the UK, and of course everyone wants his take, his politics, wants basically for Hrabal to commit to the greatness of the free West. But really, our dear Bohumil just wants to sit in the pub and get drunk.

There's this great Guy Debord remark – a boast, really, in Debord's typically topsy-turvy world: “I have written much less than the majority of people who write, but I have drunk more than the majority of people who drink.” This fits Hrabal to a T, or it certainly fits the image Hrabal likes to portray of himself here. Most of Hrabal's books are perfectly compact (if dense) novellas. And if we have to believe his own words here, when he was not writing he was most likely to be found in the pub. It's also hardly an accident that both in America and Britain Hrabal obsesses over precisely those writers who were, amongst many other things, great drunks: T.S. Eliot and, of course, Dylan Thomas. Early on in *Total Fears*, not without a hint of pathos, Hrabal proclaims:

So I sat in the Golden Tiger and I thought, as I'm always doing, about how, if the gods really loved me, I would just drop dead over a glass of beer.

And somehow this pathos fits our author and therefore becomes very affecting; it is part of Hrabal's (surely deliberate) attempt at passing himself off as some simpleton who happened to stumble and fall face first upon the key to great literature. Which is to say, he passes himself off as Hanta, the protagonist from *Too Loud a Solitude*, who works a menial job compacting old paper and in the process rescues great works of literature from being pulped. Hanta is a common man who just so happens to start reading Plato, and Hrabal is echoing that, toying with that, he is playing the senile old writer whom life has bludgeoned into docility. But of course this is not just play: he *is* old, and he *is* tired. He repeats himself all the time, his sentences lapsing in and out of ellipses, not seeing themselves through. He is forgetting names – come, who was that guy who stole fire from the gods again? - or (surely!) pretending to forget names. He almost succeeds to, succeeds in making you forget how great a writer he is while you're reading him, even though what you're reading right then and there will be perfect and highly original. You forget, until he hits you out of the blue with some great line, like when he passes a bunch of girls “in their best make-up... as if they were on their way to a big party, a friend's wedding – but *these girls are a wedding in themselves*, they have wedded themselves to a joyous, human infinitude, in them the essential is conceived and made manifest, in them the dictate of being is manifest,” or when he describes a woman's voice – with which she keeps herself “spellbound” – as “like the sound of a million coins pouring out a slot-machine, coin after coin cascading after a lucky break into your joyful cupped palms, till all the million coins are emptied out.”

On the very first page our author writes that he has “reached the peak of emptiness and everything hurts”, and I guess you could argue that the rest of the book is an attempt to explain how things got this far. But, as I began this piece, I think there is a sense in which Hrabal has always been driving at the void, is always trying to reduce life to something that he can somehow manage. It is like David Berman sings in that Silver Jews song: “Grant me one last wish / life should mean a lot less than this.” Somehow, this sense, this plea, is all over Hrabal's work for me. At the end of this book, he is toying with the idea of letting a wedding video in which he traipses around with a boa constrictor around his neck be the thing that will represent his being, his *whatever*, from beyond the grave. This is wonderfully ridiculous, of course, coming from such a towering literary figure, but it is to be expected from Hrabal. But then it is as if he himself suddenly understands his urge to reduce, too. “Maybe the height of achievement,” he starts to conclude, “would be just to wipe the video clean so that only the empty tape remained.” If only wiping this symbolic video clean was as easy as wiping an actual video clean actually is. Then we could all return to our favorite pubs and drop dead over a glass of beer. How wonderfully facile an escape that would be.

Malcolm says

This is part memoir, part epistolary novel, all writerly: Hrabal was one of the great voices of 20th century fiction and in this memoir of sorts he explores the significance of writing, the perils of growing old, the politics of literature in Soviet-era Czechoslovakia, and being married. Lovely, haunting, and worth revisiting.

Blazz J says

Slovenski prevod izbranih Hrabalovih (neodposlanih) pisem je omejen zgolj na dobrih 60 strani; mnogo premalo, da bi slovenski bralec lahko doumel pofebruarsko literarno urednikovanje pod burnim o?esom ?eškoslovaške Javne varnosti.

Bjorn says

It's 1989. Bohumil Hrabal is old. He writes letters to a young American named April, called Dubenka, a young woman fascinated with Bohemian (capital B) culture and his writing, which he thinks is mostly in the past.

He writes about aging, about the grief over his dead wife, about the kittens he takes care of.

He writes – extensively – about the concept of killing yourself by jumping out of a fifth floor window. (Defenestration, after all, is a genuinely Pragueish concept.)

He writes about hanging out at his old pub, drinking beer. Really, there's an awful lot of beer in this.

He writes about literature, art, movies. He fanboys Hasek, Sandburg, Warhol and Kerouac, he ponders Kundera and Havel – the ones who went in exile (whether abroad or in jail) for their convictions, while he refused to sign the charter and stayed to be able to write brilliant, subversive but not overtly political books.

He writes to a young American who seems to have opened a window for him, a new way of looking at himself and his work. He writes about his life, his youth, his books, how unashamedly (and rightly so) proud he is of *Too Loud A Solitude* and what he had to do to be able to write it.

He writes about the American book tour she set up for him, a Spinal Tap-esque trip through a strange land filled with strange people (being cluelessly if benignly racist in the process), speaking at colleges where they only want to ask him about politics, trying to get photo ops with people he admires who may or may not have ever heard of a drunken, aging Czech genius.

And how it all seems to go out the window (and yet somehow becomes even more important) when the demonstrations start in Vaclav Square, when the velvet revolution comes, when students take to the streets and demand the freedom he always found in writing. Does he have the right to join them? Does he have the duty? Does he even want to?

He writes letters. He doesn't send them. Seven years later, after he falls out of a fifth floor window while feeding pigeons – it's ruled an accident, of course – presumably, she gets to read them. And I can't help but wonder if she recognises herself.

Everytime god – or the government, which pretty much adds up to the same thing in the 20th century – closes a door, people open windows instead. Bohumil Hrabal's books is one of the most fascinating ones, and his autobiography (if you can call this spontaneous, funny, matter-of-factly sad, self-righteous, self-deprecating collection of letters that) is no exception. I can't do the beauty of his prose justice with anything I could write, but you owe it to yourself to read Hrabal.

Iza Diaconescu says

Totul în "Scrisori către Dubenka" are gust de bere, începând cu Revoluția de catifea, mișcările studențești, tumultul trîrîrilor, zborul porumbeilor alungați din piețe, și continuând cu amărîciunea răzleață a gândurilor lui Hrabal.

Gândurile lui Hrabal sunt ca argintul viu, acum îmi pune sub priviri o “negresă care stătea într-o cabină luminată, negresa era așa de grasă, încât cabina parcă stătea pe ea ca un palton gros de iarnă...”, ca mai apoi să sară la descrieri mai sentimentale: “Dubenka, după aceea zilele și orele au trecut în zbor, ca atunci când răstorni masa la o nuntă și totul se rostogolește pe jos în virtutea legii căderii libere...”. Trecând de la o idee la alta, textul e o adunare de frânturi de aducere aminte.

James Klagge says

I picked to read this b/c we were traveling to the Czech Republic and I wanted to read something really Czech. Hrabal fits the bill. Not only that, but while we were there the Germans were celebrating the 25th anniversary of the Fall of the Berlin Wall (11/9/89), and this book covers the same period of time, the Velvet Revolution in CZ, in a series of letter/memoirs. Not as charming as some of his other works, but contains some nice rambles.

Glykerion says

Hrabal is wonderful! Each and every line is a feast. And one learns so many things from his texts!
