

TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

This translation is based on the first edition of *Morytáty a legendy*, published in 1968 by Československý spisovatel. The images that accompany each story are from woodcuts originally created for old broadside ballads and reproduced as illustrations for that first edition. *Morytáty a legendy* arrived in the early months of the Prague Spring and followed a series of critical and popular successes for Hrabal. A month after its publication, the film “Closely Watched Trains”—based on Hrabal’s 1965 novella of the same name—won the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film. Hrabal rode this wave through 1968 and beyond until he was banned from publishing in 1970.

Morytáty a legendy was a collection of unpublished short stories, some new and some old. The author’s “postscripts” contain his comments at the time of publication and represent a self-effacing running commentary on his method, which mines pub tales and urban folklore for material. The postscripts offer everything from needed explanatory notes (“A Legend Played on Strings Stretched between Cradle and Coffin”) to outright mystification (“The Ballad of the Queen of the Night”) to an epilogue four times the length of the story itself (“The Legend of Egon Bondy and Vladimírek”). The “Vladimírek” epilogue provides a foretaste of *The Tender Barbarian* (*Něžný barbar*, completed 1973), Hrabal’s autobiographical tribute to the artist Vladimír Boudník, who would die suddenly at the end of 1968.

At the book’s heart is “The Legend of Cain,” a bleak story written nearly twenty years earlier and the basis for the novella *Closely Watched Trains* (*Ostře sledované vlaky*, 1965). The familiar outlines of the novella are here: a young train dispatcher fails at suicide during the final months of the Second World War, decides he wants to live, then meets an unexpected death. But the sentimentality and moral certainty of the novella are absent. Instead of adolescent sexual angst and a heroic partisan death, we find an existential obsession with suicide and a meaningless, accidental death at the hands of a countryman. Josef Škvorecký claimed that Hrabal was stung by accusations that *Closely Watched Trains* had conceded too much to middle-brow tastes, and he believed Hrabal may have included “The Legend of Cain” in the collection for that reason. It is remarkable that this story has never been published in English, and this alone justifies an English edition of *Morytáty a legendy* in the year of its fiftieth anniversary!

Translating Hrabal presented many problems, the most conspicuous of which is the book’s title. “Murder ballad” renders *morytát*, a Czech borrowing from German

denoting early modern popular ballads that reported gruesome and salacious events—the “true crime” genre of their day. As Hrabal’s final Postscript observes, the possible etymologies add up to a “reaction of popular fantasy to a particular occurrence that is in conflict with the moral order, involves violent death, and evokes anxiety and alarm.” Hrabal employs the term ironically (as in “The Ballad of a Pig Banquet”) and in earnest (“A May Murder Ballad”), but what remains constant is lurking violence and a violation of public manners, whether latent or manifest.

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