



I Served the King of England (New Directions Classic)

By Bohumil Hrabal

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In a comic masterpiece following the misadventures of a simple but hugely ambitious waiter in pre-World War II Prague, who rises to wealth only to lose everything with the onset of Communism, Bohumil Hrabal takes us on a tremendously funny and satirical trip through 20th-century Czechoslovakia.

First published in 1971 in a typewritten edition, then finally printed in book form in 1989, *I Served the King of England* is "an extraordinary and subtly tragicomic novel" (*The New York Times*), telling the tale of Ditie, a hugely ambitious but simple waiter in a deluxe Prague hotel in the years before World War II. Ditie is called upon to serve not the King of England, but Haile Selassie. It is one of the great moments in his life. Eventually, he falls in love with a Nazi woman athlete as the Germans are invading Czechoslovakia. After the war, through the sale of valuable stamps confiscated from the Jews, he reaches the heights of his ambition, building a hotel. He becomes a millionaire, but with the institution of communism, he loses everything and is sent to inspect mountain roads. Living in dreary circumstances, Ditie comes to terms with the inevitability of his death, and with his place in history.

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I Served the King of England (New Directions Classic) By Bohumil Hrabal Bibliography

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Written in the form of a memoir, this playful social satire follows the rise and fall of a diminutive Czech waiter while mirroring the political turmoil of recent Czech history. Gleefully chronicling the grossness and corruption of the 1920s, Hrabal makes Dittie's early life delightful reading. The mood turns abruptly sour when Dittie falls in love with a German gym teacher in the '30s and becomes equally enamored of her Nazi ideology. After the war, Dittie is sentenced to prison as a collaborator; then becomes a hotelier with profits made from selling rare stamps stolen from Jewish concentration camp victims. He hopes to curry favor with his former employers, but they disdainfully ignore him. By the end of the book, with the coming of communism, Dittie has lost everything; he is banished to the former Sudetenland, with only some farm animals as company. The book begins brilliantly, but Hrabal's depiction of post-WW II Czechoslovakia is unrealistically rosy, and Dittie's moral transformation is not entirely persuasive. But the novel is always witty, often wise, and sparkles in Wilson's beautiful translation.

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From Library Journal

Sparkling with comic genius and narrative exuberance, this excellently translated novel by a major Czech writer brings into sharp focus the grotesque absurdities of recent Czech history. Dittie, a busboy with an inferiority complex and a driving ambition to become a millionaire, quickly rises to become a head waiter, but the respect he craves continues to allude him. When he marries a Nazi gym teacher, the Czechs despise him even more, while the Germans barely tolerate him. Rare stamps taken from wealthy Jews make his dream come true after the war, but his first-class hotel is soon nationalized by the Communists and he ends his life in poverty and isolation writing his memoirs. As is typical of Hrabal's work (e.g., *Closely Watched Trains*, LJ 2/1/69), the novel is full of zany characters whose antics range from supremely entertaining to bizarrely tragic. Highly recommended.

- Marie Bednar, *Pennsylvania State Univ. Libs., University Park*

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Review

A comic novel of great inventiveness . . . charming, wise, and sad—and an unexpectedly good laugh. -- *Philadelphia Inquirer*

A joyful, picaresque story, which begins with Baron Munchausen-like adventures and ends in tears and solitude. -- *James Wood, The London Review of Books*

An extraordinary and subtly tragicomic novel. -- *The New York Times*

One of the most authentic incarnations of magical Prague, an incredible union of earthy humor and baroque imagination. -- *Milan Kundera*

Users Review

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