

Documents Concerning Rubashov the Gambler

by

Carl-Johan Vallgren

Harvill Secker, £12.99

(Review published in: Scotland on Sunday, 14 October 2007)

Josef Rubashov sits down on New Year's Eve 1899 to a game of poker with the Devil; and promptly loses. The price to pay is immortality (Hell being full). Rubashov immediately - and for the entire succeeding century - tries to kill himself or to defeat Time itself. Over the years, he encounters others condemned to a similar fate - Paracelsus prominent amongst them. He criss-crosses Europe. He flickers Zelig-like in and out of old photographs. He appears in circus rings and magic shows. He confounds physicians and fellow-gamblers. He throws himself under trams and into war-zones.

Given the right twist, this could have been an interesting novel. But as Rubashov fails in his quest, so - disappointingly - Vallgren fails in his. Much of the book is devoted to a impressionistic hop-and-skip through the worst periods and defining moments of the 20th century. And even here, there are no surprises: Rubashov falls in with the usual suspects - Rasputin, Alasdeir Crowley, the Nazis (oh - and Kim Philby); he pops up in the usual places - Passchendaele, Warsaw 1942, Hungary 1956, the Berlin Wall, Bosnia, Ulster. (This is a curiously parochial itinerary for a tour of Hell: did nothing bad happen outside Europe in the 20th century? What blinkers do we Europeans wear against the sufferings of the rest of the world?)

Like Rubashov, we struggle on wearily. We seek empathy with the central character and - ultimately - shrug our shoulders: there are glimpses of Rubashov the man, but these are strangely subdued, hidden under a gloss; there is the occasional attempt at slapstick, moments of romance and of deep personal anguish, but these vignettes are almost totally obliterated by a broad brush wielded heavily - sometimes very heavily indeed: "He was in a ruined city somewhere. Cries in Polish and Yiddish could be heard. He realised he must be in a ghetto."

This book is a disappointment. From the title, from the first chapter, even from the name of the translator (Sarah Death), we might expect something sparkling, weird, provocative, intoxicating, comedic. But while Vallgren's writing is frequently of a high standard, the plot is mediocre, the structure flaccid - and, without giving anything away, the ending is just a cop-out. Two years ago, a translation appeared of a more recent work by Vallgren (*The Horrific Sufferings of...Hercules Barefoot*, 2002); that book was far more tightly constructed, but equally devoid of any levity, equally full of cruel and pointless bloodshed, bursting with esoteric knowledge measured out by the yard like Umberto Eco at his most annoying. In *Rubashov*, written in 1996, there is more of the same, but less well-written: the reader feels like the wedding-guest cornered by the Ancient Mariner.

The author has cut his canvas too large. Anyone can look out on the modern world, observe its many flaws, and give voice to a deep horror. It is far more difficult to explore the real reasons behind the potential for inhumanity in humankind, and to set them out in a way that engages the reader's pity and anger.

Andrew Drummond