

paul bryers, *In a Pig's Ear: A Novel*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996. Pp. 277. isbn: 0374-17564-0. \$23.

With pervasive and sinister irony, Paul Bryers snares readers into a labyrinthine wasteland, at once horrible and irristible, dominated by protagonist-narrator Milan, a subtly diabolical Merlin figure who transforms the ancient Jewish cemetery of Prague into a post-Nazi Stonehenge. Even after his escape to California, Milan dwells psychologically in shadowy lands where Hitler's ungodly neo-followers seep poisonously from Eastern European forests and ruins of the Berlin Wall.

Arthurians will be intrigued by the author's clever perversion of both Grail motifs and courtly ideals. Those who interpret the quest as a search for human identity and spirit will find in Bryers's work a case of 'be careful what you wish for' or of 'don't ask; don't tell.' Responses to Perceval-like questions in this context will be patently other than miracles of grace. The author's choice of generic collage elements enhances his darkly sensational effect. Arthurian motifs are unmistakable, but the story interpolates themes and settings from various traditions; the novel's irony is honed on morose allusions to the Brothers Grimm.

The hero, Adam, a second-generation ruler over an ephemeral Hollywood kingdom, evokes a doomed, pre-Camlann Arthur. The influence of Adam's Jewish-American film-producer stepfather combines explosively with his origins as the apparent son of a once-titled Luftwaffe Lieutenant and of a sturdy, golden-haired, 'princess who would not have felt the pea.' The mother enters the story as a pregnant young physician, confined to a camouflaged tower turned makeshift military hospital. Adam's deepest fear, that he will turn out to be the son of Nazi elite, and devil incarnate, Paul Josef Goebbels, provides the heroic identity dilemma.

Building on stepfather Sam Epstein's legacy, Adam attempts to produce the definitive film version of the Arthurian legend. From Magda Krenkel, the Morgan le Fey character, and her Mordred-like son, to Adam's predictably unfaithful wife, Nicky, Arthurian analogues people the entire work. However, the situation never approaches any ideal comparable with a Camelot, not even a celluloid one—except perhaps in some desperate recesses of Adam's imagination.

The Cold-War first encounter between a post-adolescent Adam and the sexually ambivalent, darkly intelligent, Milan begins a complicated lifelong partnership. Adam takes Milan from his deprived life as Eastern European university instructor, into a new role as 'shrink to the Hollywood stars.' This warped reduction of Merlin's astrological connection typifies Bryers's ironic genius. Milan carries with him the burden of guilt for the dismal existences of the countrymen and women he leaves behind.

Adam's premature, tragic death is followed by Milan's framing for the murder of Nicky, and an unexpected confession. The entire story is conveyed as Milan's lament to the pig whose pen is used as his prison after Nicky's murder. This format perverts the ancient Welsh situation of the *Yr Oianau* or 'Little Pig Stanzas.' The implications for the reader are especially disconcerting.

The complexity and nightmare vision distinguishing *In a Pig's Ear*, also bring it to the limits of Arthurian status. The seeming generic blend of John Le Carré-style Cold-War fiction and Grimms' fairytales stands in weird juxtaposition to plot elements and character analogues based on medieval romance. If the author's objective is deep reader shock, he succeeds. If idealism defines the Arthurian story, Bryers has concocted a masterful anti-romance of fractured post-modern disorder. He confronts the reader with dark reflections on the bestiality of human nature. *In a Pig's Ear* has much to say to its audience, Arthurian, post-modern and otherwise.

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