War with the Newts

Karel Capek

‘I gave them my word that if they would bring me the pearl shells I would give them harpoons and knives in exchange, so that they could defend themselves, see? That’s an honest deal, sir.’

THE PITCH

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THE BOOK

War with the Newts (1936) is Karel Capek’s darkly humorous allegory of early twentieth-century Czech politics. Captain van Toch discovers a colony of newts in Sumatra which can not only be taught to trade and use tools, but also to speak. As the rest of the world learns of the creatures and their wonderful capabilities, it is clear that this new species is ripe for exploitation – they can be traded in their thousands, will do the work no human wants to do, and can fight – but the humans have given no thought to the terrible consequences of their actions.

THE AUTHOR

Karel Capek (1890-1938) was a central figure in pre-War Czech culture and a social satirist and science-fiction writer of genius. His major works include War with the Newts, The Makropoulos Affair (the basis for Janacek’s opera), Nine Fairy Tales: And One More Thrown in for Good Measure, Insect Play and R.U.R., which introduced the term ‘robot’.

QUOTES

‘A great writer of the past who speaks to the present in a voice brilliant, clear, honourable, blackly funny and prophetic’ Kurt Vonnegut

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A Short History of Decay

E. M. Cioran

'History is nothing but a procession of false absolutes, a series of temples raised to pretexts, a degradation of the mind before the Improbable.'

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THE BOOK

A Short History of Decay (1949) is E. M. Cioran’s nihilistic and witty collection of aphoristic essays concerning the nature of civilization in mid-twentieth-century Europe. Touching upon Man’s need to worship, the feebleness of God, the downfall of the Ancient Greeks and the melancholy baseness of all existence, Cioran’s pieces are pessimistic in the extreme, but also display a beautiful certainty that renders them delicate, vivid, and memorable. Illuminating and brutally honest, A Short History of Decay dissects Man’s decadence in a remarkable series of moving and beautiful pieces.

THE AUTHOR

E. M. Cioran (1911-1995) was one of Central Europe’s most remarkable philosophers, author of what William Gass called romances on ‘alienation, absurdity, boredom, futility, decay, the tyranny of history, the vulgarities of change, awareness as agony, reason as disease’. A Romanian, he lived much of his life in Paris and many of his major works were written in French, including A Short History of Decay, The Trouble with Being Born and Drawn and Quartered.

QUOTES

‘To miss reading this book would be a deprivation’ Los Angeles Times

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Proud To Be A Mammal

Czeslaw Milosz

‘To talk about one’s childhood usually is to tell about one’s family, yet in this respect I must confess that for me adults resided in a hazy world, not my own. I was a lone child in a magic kingdom that I explored from early morning till dusk.’

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THE BOOK

Proud to be a Mammal (1942-97) is Czeslaw Milosz’s moving and diverse collection of essays. Among them, he covers his passion for poetry, his love of the Polish language that was so nearly wiped out by the violence of the twentieth century, and his happy childhood. Milosz also includes a letter to his friend in which he voices his concern about the growing indifference to murder and the true value of freedom of thought, as well as a verbal map of Wilno, with each street revealing both a rich local history and intricate, poignant personal memories.

THE AUTHOR

Czeslaw Milosz (1911-2004) won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1980. Born in Lithuania while it was still part of the Russian Empire, he lived much of his life in Poland or exiled in California. He was the author of one of the definitive books on totalitarianism, The Captive Mind, but also wrote with extraordinary vividness and moral authority on his childhood, his experiences under Nazism and on the tragedy of Central Europe.

QUOTES

‘Bears witness to Milosz’z lifetime of toil in the fields of memory, faith and art’ Bookforum

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My Happy Days In Hell

György Faludy

‘The knowledge that in a few minutes, when I left the hotel, I would have no home, no bed of my own, no possessions for a long time to come and that I was going towards absolute insecurity – that made me rather happy.’

THE PITCH

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THE BOOK

My Happy Days in Hell (1962) is Gyorgy Faludy’s grimly beautiful autobiography of his battle to survive tyranny and oppression. Fleeing Hungary in 1938 as the German army approaches, acclaimed poet Faludy journeys to Paris, where he finds a lover but merely a cursory asylum. When the French capitulate to the Nazis, Faludy travels to North Africa, then on to America, where he volunteers for military service. Missing his homeland and determined to do the right thing, he returns – only to be imprisoned, tortured, and slowly starved, eventually becoming one of only twenty-one survivors of his camp.

THE AUTHOR

György Faludy (1910-2006) was raised and died in Hungary but spent much of his long life in various forms of exile. A poet and translator, Faludy was imprisoned by the Communist authorities in post-war Hungary where he was subjected to the most terrible treatment. My Happy Days in Hell takes these experiences and makes them into an extraordinary and highly enjoyable work of art.

QUOTES

‘A man whose moral compass in all the great questions of the twentieth century has never deviated from the correct direction, no matter what the cost to himself’ Telegraph

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The Cowards

Josef Skvorecky

‘Benno blew a long note and it sounded hard and very sure, so I stopped worrying about him losing his tone while he was in the concentration camp. He hadn’t.’

THE PITCH

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THE BOOK

The Cowards (1958) is Josef Skvorecky’s blackly comic tale of post-war politics that was immediately banned on publication. In 1945, in Kostelec, Danny is playing saxophone for the best jazz band in Czechoslovakia. Their trumpeter has just got out of a concentration camp, their bass player is only allowed in the band since he owns the bass, and the love of Danny’s life is in love with somebody else. But Danny despairs most about the bourgeoisie patriots in his town playing at revolution in the face of the approaching Red Army – not least because it ruins the band’s chance of any good gigs.

THE AUTHOR

Josef Skvorecky (born in 1924) is a leading Czech novelist and dissident, a key figure in keeping alive from exile a liberal, humanistic Czech culture during the Cold War. His most famous novels are The Cowards, Miss Silver’s Past, The Bass Saxophone and The Engineer of Human Souls.

QUOTES

‘Anyone who wants to know how it felt to be young, idealistic and innocent at the end of the war should read The Cowards’ The Times Literary Supplement

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Life Is A Dream

Gyula Krúdy

‘The story of his chronic stomach ailment was the story of his life. Yet all his livelong days he was obliged to bolt down the braised porkolt gravies, soupy goulashes and watery broths bathing the slabs of boiled beef served up by tavern kitchens everywhere.’

THE PITCH

- A major new Penguin initiative: a series of ten extraordinary Central European Classics
- Designed to showcase some of the remarkable writing from the region: includes memoir, essays, novels, philosophy and short stories

THE BOOK

Life is a Dream (1931) is Gyula Krudy’s magical collection of ten short stories. Creating a world where editors shoot themselves after a hard day’s brunching, men attend duels incognito and lovers fall out over salad dressing, Life is a Dream is a comic, nostalgic, romantic and erotic glimpse into the Hungary of the early twentieth century. Focussing on the poor and dispossessed, these tales of love, food, death and sex are ironic and wise about the human condition and the futility of life, and display fully Krudy’s wit and mastery of the form.

THE AUTHOR

Gyula Krúdy (1878-1933) is a much-loved and admired Hungarian writer. He spent much of his life in Budapest and wrote many stories about the alcoholic and erotic possibilities of the city in its heyday, possibilities which he himself lived to the full. His most famous books in English are The Adventures of Sindbad and Life is a Dream.

QUOTES

‘Krudy writes of imaginary people, of imaginary events, in dream-like settings; but the spiritual essence of his persons and of their places is stunningly real’ The New Yorker

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The Elephant

Slawomir Mrozek

‘At that moment the elephant shuddered and rose in the air. For a few seconds it swayed just above the ground but a gust of wind blew it upwards until its mighty silhouette was against the sky.’

THE PITCH

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THE BOOK

The Elephant (1957) is Slawomir Mrozek’s award-winning collection of hilarious and unnerving short stories, satirising life in Poland under a totalitarian regime. The family of a wealthy lawyer keep a ‘tamed progressive’ as a pet; a zoo saves money for the workers by fashioning their elephant from rubber; a swan is dismissed from the municipal park for public drunkenness; and under the Writers’ Association, literary critics are banished to the salt mines. In these tales of bureaucrats, officials and artists, Mrozek conjures perfectly a life of imagined crimes and absurd authority.

THE AUTHOR

Slawomir Mrozek (born in 1930) is now principally known as Poland’s master of Absurd Theatre, in plays such as Striptease, Repeat Performance and Vatzlav. He began his career though with the timeless story collection The Elephant with its extraordinary illustrations by Daniel Mroz.

QUOTES

‘Extraordinary . . . Mrozek’s brief fables are something like Kafka’s stories, but they’re funnier’ Spectator

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How I Came to Know Fish

Ota Pavel

‘The quill made a JUMP! and disappeared. I could see it racing under the surface towards the marsh marigolds. The rod bent into an arch, and for the first time in my life I felt the delicious pull of a fish.’

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THE BOOK

How I Came to Know Fish (1974) is Ota Pavel's magical memoir of his childhood in Czechoslovakia. Fishing with his father and his Uncle Prosek – the two finest fishermen in the world – he takes a peaceful pleasure from the rivers and ponds of his country. But when the Nazis invade, his father and two older brothers are sent to concentration camps and Pavel must steal their confiscated fish back from under the noses of the SS to feed his family. With tales of his father’s battle to provide for his family both in wealthy freedom and in terrifying persecution, this is one boy’s passionate and affecting tale of life, love and fishing.

THE AUTHOR

Ota Pavel (1930-1973) worked for much of his short life as a journalist and sports reporter. Despite serious bouts of mental illness he wrote brilliant, lyrical accounts, some collected in How I Came to Know Fish, of his childhood and his family in a Czechoslovakia under overwhelming threat from Nazism.

QUOTES

‘A moving, bittersweet coming of age . . . A collection that works its magic quietly’ Kirkus Reviews

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The Snows of Yesteryear
Portraits for an Autobiography

Gregor von Rezzori

'We grew up with the myth of a lost bygone world, golden and miraculous. We were already what later hundreds of thousands of Europeans were to become: refugees, exiles, leaves tossed by the storms of history.'

THE PITCH

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THE BOOK

The Snows of Yesteryear (1989) is Gregor von Rezzori’s haunting evocation of his childhood in Czernowitz, in present-day Ukraine. Growing up after the First World War, Rezzori portrays a twilit world suspended between the dying ways of an imperial past and the terrors of the twentieth century. He recalls his volatile, boar-hunting father, his earthy nursemaid, his fragile, aristocratic mother, his adored governess and the tragic death of his beloved sister, in a luminous story of war, unrest, eccentricity, folk tales, dark forests, night flights, and what it is like to lose your home.

THE AUTHOR

Gregor von Rezzori (1914-1988) was born in the Austro-Hungarian province of Bukovina (now part of Ukraine). At different points in his life he was a citizen of the Habsburg Empire, Romania, the Soviet Union and Austria, with a substantial interval of statelessness. He lived the latter part of his life in Italy.

QUOTES

‘One of those rare and lovely books . . . in the precision and quality of Rezzori’s prose, in his passion for the perfect detail, and in his power to capture the reader’s heart’ Alan Furst

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Old Masters

Thomas Bernhard

‘I hate walking, he says, it seems so pointless to me. I walk, and while I am walking I keep thinking how I hate walking’

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THE BOOK

Old Masters (1985) is Thomas Bernhard’s devilishly funny story about the friendship between two old men. For over thirty years Reger, a music critic, has sat on the same bench in front of a Tintoretto painting in a Viennese museum, thinking and railing against contemporary society, his fellow men, artists, the weather, even the state of public lavatories. His friend Atzbacher has been summoned to meet him, and through his eyes we learn more about Reger – the tragic death of his wife, his thoughts of suicide and, eventually, the true purpose of their appointment. At once pessimistic and exuberant, rancorous and hilarious, Old Masters is a richly satirical portrait of culture, genius, nationhood, class, the value of art and the pretensions of humanity.

THE AUTHOR

Thomas Bernhard (1931-1989) was one of the greatest German-language novelists and playwrights of the 20th century. Much hated in his native Austria for his highly inventive derision for all things Austrian (which culminated in his will, which banned further publication of his work there), Bernhard wrote a series of harsh, inventive and brilliant novels, including Gargoyles, Correction, Wittgenstein’s Nephew, Old Masters, Yes and Extinction.

QUOTES

‘Bernhard is one of the masters of contemporary European fiction’ George Steiner

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