GREAT 20th CENTURY NOVELS from CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

The common thread, if there is one at all, between these novels is that they are relatively unknown and far too infrequently read in the United States. Each of them opens a window into the bizarre and wonderful world of Central and Eastern Europe.

I Served the King of England / Bohumil Hrabal / PG5039.18 .R2 O2713 1989 Stacks, level two. Tells the absurd tale of an ambitious man's climb from busboy to hotel owner in Prague during the 1930s and 40s. Hrabal is a master of both storytelling and the surreal, both of which combine beautifully in this novel.


War With the Newts / Karel Capek / PG5038.C3 V313 1990 Stacks, level two. From the man who gave the world the word robot comes this fantastic tale of man's penchant for self-destruction. A race of intelligent sea-dwelling newts is discovered. After a period of ruthless exploitation by humans the newts, um, get bent and throw down with the humans. Wickedly satirical.

The Joke / Milan Kundera / PG5039.21 .U6 Z313 1983 Stacks, level two. This is an early work from Kundera, author of The Unbearable Lightness of Being. The novel is a brilliant meditation on the cruelty and pettiness of the Czechoslovak Communist regime in the 1950s and 60s.

Heroes Like Us / Thomas Brussig / PT2662.R87 H4513 1997 Stacks, level two. A young, megalomaniacal East German man tells the story of how his groin injury is solely responsible for the fall of the Berlin Wall. An irreverent revisionist view of the events of 1989, it's also the funniest German book--by far--that I've ever read.

The Reader / Bernhard Schlink / PT2680.L54 V6713 1997 Stacks, level two. The only German novel known to have reached the Oprah Winfrey book club list. Given the lack of attention that German literature receives, this must mean it's a darn good book.

Perfume : The Story of a Murderer / Patrick Süskind / PT2681.U74 P313 1986 Stacks, level two. This novel is one of the best selling books of all time in Germany. An orphan in 17th century France is born with an amazing sense of smell and becomes a famous perfumer and serial killer to boot. Sound weird? It is.

The Tin Drum / Günter Grass / PT2613.R338 D2713 1987 Stack, level two. Oskar Matzerath is a young boy in Danzig who decides to stop growing at the age of three. The story of his life as a dwarf is a startling allegory for Germany under fascism. Grass recently received the 1999 Nobel Prize for Literature, mainly on the strength of this momentous novel. This work was made into a deeply disturbing film by Volker Schlöndorff.
The Magic Mountain / Thomas Mann / PT2625.A44 Z313 1969 Stacks, level two. Mann sends young Hans Castorp to a sanitarium in Switzerland to visit his tubercular cousin. Hans extends his visit--by seven years--and encounters an odd bunch of characters who all vie for his young, inexperienced mind and body. The new translation by John Woods is accurate but severe; I much prefer the older, flowing H. T. Lowe-Porter version.

The Invention of Curried Sausage / Uwe Timm / PT2682.I39 E5813 1995 Stacks, level two. Timm's novel tells the story of Lena Brücker, who hides a German army deserter in her apartment at the end of World War II. Desperate for love and companionship, she keeps him there after the war's end by withholding the news that the war is over from him. The title may sound odd, but this is a beautiful and moving tale of love and desire.

Doctor Zhivago / Boris Pasternak / PG3476.P27 D687 1989 Stacks, level two. Warning: after reading this book you will intensely dislike the Hollywoodized film version. The movie is a sentimental, creamy-dreamy love story; Pasternak's novel is a gritty account of life and love during the Russian Revolution. If you've never made it through a Russian epic novel (Anna Karenina, War and Peace, etc.), I promise that this is the one that will break the ice.

Dale and Jennifer Askey 12-99