

Review of Olha Rudakevych, translator. A Novel about a Good Person. By Emma Andiiievskia

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Olha Rudakevych, translator. *A Novel about a Good Person*. By Emma Andrievska, edited and with an introduction by Marko Robert Stech, Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies P, 2018. xiv, 224 pp. \$29.95, paper.

This volume, *A Novel about a Good Person*, is the first book-length English-language translation of Emma Andrievska's work, and it is a welcome addition to the growing corpus of major Ukrainian literary works in English translation. Andrievska, born in 1931, is the leading diasporic Ukrainian woman author of the post-World War II period. She has achieved legendary status among connoisseurs of innovative, experimental Ukrainian writing. Unfortunately, though, she remains relatively little known to the broader reading public. In 2018, Andrievska received the Shevchenko Prize, Ukraine's highest state award for the creative arts, which is an important measure of professional recognition. Afterward, many new publications of her works appeared through the efforts of Ukrainian presses. This has allowed a new generation of readers to have comprehensive access to her literary oeuvre.

Andrievska is better known for her poetry. She is associated with the New York Group of Ukrainian poets, although she was in New York for only a brief period. Since the early 1950s, she has been based primarily in Munich; for several decades, she worked for the Radio Free Europe / Radio Free Liberty (RFE/RL) Ukrainian Service. In recent times, she has been increasingly recognized for her vibrant, colourful paintings, which are often used (as in the case of this book) in cover design.

Narrative prose, though, is also an important part of Andrievska's oeuvre. *Roman pro dobru liudynu*, Andrievska's second novel, has received the highest acclaim. It is her most "reality-connected" longer prose text, so it is an apt choice for translation and for introducing the English-language reader to her works. It was written during the years 1964-68 and was first published (in Ukrainian) in 1973. The book is set in the Mittenwald displaced persons (DP) camp in southern Bavaria, part of the United States occupation zone, circa 1946-47. The DP camps, and this camp in particular, played a unique and prominent role in the history of Ukrainian diaspora. The novel is valuable as an inspired and memorable literary representation of this important site. However, Andrievska's Mittenwald is very much like Bruno Schulz's Hourglass Sanatorium: space and time both behave unusually within its perimeter, and the border between the real and the dreamlike disappears. The camp's inhabitants encounter, for example, an opening in the ground leading directly to hell, or they suddenly find themselves on Kyiv's Khreshchatyk Street. Past, present, and future appear to coexist, and so, Dmytryk, the novel's main character, at one point witnesses his future death in the United States. Some of this is a creative reflection of the feeling of

suspended time that many DP camp residents reported experiencing while awaiting resettlement as refugees in other countries. Andrievska, however, takes this element a step further, making “chronoschisms” (to use Ursula K. Heise’s apt neologism) a fundamental principle in the structuring of her text. Marko Robert Stech, in his helpful and informative introductory essay accompanying the translation (vii-xiv), discusses the idea of what Andrievska calls “round time.” Stech also outlines other important aesthetic and philosophical aspects of the text. In addition, he offers a rich biographic and historical contextualization of the narrative.

While Dmytryk, the character mentioned earlier, helps tie the plot together, it would be incorrect to view him as a protagonist in the traditional sense. Rather, the subplot centring on his search for goodness and his eventual transformation from a camp smuggler and petty thief into a profoundly ethical being—Andrievska’s ingenious take on the philosophical teachings of Hryhorii Skovoroda—is but a framing device that allows the author to assemble a fascinating gallery of memorable characters and mini-narratives focusing on them. This collection of characters includes the good sorcerer Baba Hrytsykha; the hapless but well-intentioned inventor Petro Kopylenko; the gentle drunk Stetsko Stupalka; Andriiko Nickel, a teenager striving to become an independent adult; and Andriiko’s obsessive mother.

The gallery of characters is quite large, and the reader is given at least a bit of backstory about each individual; a vivid impression is thus created. The characters all experience an ethical reckoning of some sort, so their personal quests combine with Dmytryk’s journey, forming a mosaic of scenes of good prevailing over evil. Andrievska delights in the richness of Ukrainian traditional surnames and especially enjoys using nickname-like names of Cossack origin. In her text, the names assume the characteristic of what in German is called “*sprechende Namen*,” that is, they are charactonyms, or Cratylic names—names that reflect a character’s essential feature (Shakespeare’s *Mistress Quickly* is a frequently cited example). The luxurious proliferation of names in Andrievska’s Ukrainian-language novel creates a special challenge for translator Olha Rudakevych, who opts to translate most of the names into English. But complete adherence to this principle proves to be impossible, and sometimes the choice of a particular character’s name is not clearly derived. Thus, “P”iatak” becomes “Nickel”; “Syven’kyi” is rendered as “Rathergray,” and “Vyshnevs’ka,” as “Cherryson.” But other names, like “Lushchak” and “Pohoril’nyi,” are left untranslated. In one case, “Sopun,” which could have been rendered as “Snuffles,” becomes “Sapun,” the word for soap in several European languages, and this invokes a completely different set of associations.

This inconsistency in the presentation of character names, however, is the only potentially problematic aspect of this translation. It would have been

helpful to include a translator's note reflecting on the challenges of the text and explaining the choices made. In general, the text is fluent and highly readable, and it renders well both the author's humour and her vivid imagery (for example, in the story of Dmytryk's gang, which smuggles a cow into the camp, or in the parable about a pile of manure's asking for an audience with the Creator). There are several instances in which I find myself disagreeing with the translator's choices, especially where she tends towards literalism. For example, she renders "kleiky" as "gluey" rather than as "sticky," and "iama z nechystotamy," as "a filthy pit" rather than as "a cesspool." But the number of such instances is small, and overall, the translation is a definite success. Let us hope that this lovingly produced book will reach a wide, appreciative audience. I strongly recommend this translation to anyone interested in innovative writing and in the turbulent history of twentieth-century Ukraine.

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Work Cited

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