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# WORLD LITERATURE IN REVIEW

## Fiction

Zoltán Böszörményi. **Far from Nothing.** Paul Sohar, tr. Toronto. Exile. 2006. 173 pages. Can\$23 / US\$19.95. ISBN 1-55096-055-5

———. **Vanda örök: Mig gondolom hogy létezem.** Budapest. Ulpius-ház. 2005. 203 pages. ISBN 963-7253-63-7

"Every certainty contains some degree of ambiguity. When I cannot be certain of a certainty, I turn to something else for help. To perception." Thus reads *Far from Nothing's* Cartesian starter. Zoltán Böszörményi's novel sits on the borderline between the old-fashioned work ethic and today's new "realize-your-own-self." Böszörményi, a Hungarian poet from Arad, Romania, spent his youth under Communist rule in poverty. He emigrated to Canada, where he became a businessman, now living in Monaco. Thus he found his way to happiness through self-preservation, living his own consciousness.

The protagonist, Rudolf, age thirty-five, manages a car dealership somewhere in North America. A product of the 1970s, he brought with him a heritage of the "old world" striving for knowledge, studying philosophy. Rudolf's character resembles a Rorschach test: we see the storyline through Rudolf's eyes and thoughts. Although married, Rudolf's main passion is Wanda, an attractive fellow student, who is mad about Rudolf practicing

the "ars amatoria" in all imaginable forms.

The locus is an ordinary car dealership. The contrast between the "old mores" and the "happy-go-lucky" youngsters emerges in the way the dealership's owner made his fortune, struggling and working hard. His sons, however, found a new firm and are able to effortlessly repay a \$30,000 loan tenfold. Next, an older Chinese philosophy professor, Wang, asks for three years of leave and starts manufacturing a new kind of herbal health drink. First he is ridiculed, but when his venture turns into success, everyone acquiesces in admiration: success justifies, money conquers philosophy. Although a "philosopher," Rudolf can sell cars better than anyone else.

Life at the dealership grows troubled, however. A leasing company goes bankrupt as the owner embezzled ever-increasing sums of money to satisfy the extravagant demands of his wife; they cannot pay. This ruins Rudolf's reputation. When he confronts the owner of the bankrupt leasing company, he finds a whimpering old man. The end of Rudolf's career is nearing; the owner summons him, offering reenlistment as an ordinary salesman. Rudolf declines and defiantly resigns.

Rudolf tries getting in touch with Wanda, but her phone doesn't answer. The last day in his office, he opens a newspaper, and among the obituaries, notices Wanda's face accompanied by the statement that

she has suddenly died. Rudolf runs to Wanda's apartment, tearing the door open. The novel ends using the same three lines that it started with, as if Böszörményi were suggesting that this is a James Joyce-inspired "river novel" like *Finnegans Wake*.

Since the entire series of two-page chapters revolves around the Cartesian idea of *Cogito, ergo sum*, one is led to believe that Wanda's "eternity" could be imaginary. Böszörményi may be credited with having invented a complex, multiple intersecting web of writing that describes the conflict of the new and the old morality with sex as an escape mechanism.

The novel makes thought-provoking reading, studded with philosophical, poetic passages. Paul Sohar's translation is in every way worthy of his impressive output as a known translator of Hungarian poetry.

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Nathan Englander. **The Ministry of Special Cases.** New York. Knopf. 2007. 339 pages. \$25. ISBN 978-0-375-40493-1

As he demonstrated admirably in his remarkable debut book of short stories, *For the Relief of Unbearable Urges*, Nathan Englander delivers the sharpest of character portraits along with trenchant commentary on contemporary society and its pitfalls and pratfalls. In *The Ministry of Special Cases*, he proves that he has