

Brigid Pasulka, *A Long, Long Time Ago and Essentially True* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009). v, 354 pp. ISBN: 9780547055077.

Michael M. J. Fischer once asserted: “What the newer works [of ethnic fiction] bring home forcefully is, first, the paradoxical sense that ethnicity is something reinvented and reinterpreted in each generation by each individual and that it is often something quite puzzling to the individual, something over which he or she lacks control. Ethnicity is not something that is simply passed on from generation to generation, taught and learned; it is something dynamic, often unsuccessfully repressed or avoided.”<sup>1</sup> If we consider Fischer’s influential observations about ethnicity and memory, we find a sound explanation for literature that undertakes what he calls the “contemporary reinvention of ethnic identity through remembering.” If, indeed, the reproduction of ethnicity requires the work of reinvention, then, as a Polish-American novelist, born in the United States and writing in English, Pasulka does indeed do that work, treating Polishness as a fluid and fleeting category, subject to politics, occupation, violence, gender, and capital, a category produced through imagination, reinterpretation, and struggle. *A Long, Long Time Ago and Essentially True* manages to trace, via chapters that alternate in time, women across three generations of a family, first in the Polish highlands in World War II, later in the post-communist chaos of a Krakow scrambling to become “modern.” Focusing on interconnected women from rural and urban, historical and contemporary Poland, Pasulka’s text brings to life the continuities and discontinuities of Polish life over the past century. The text skillfully navigates the personal and emotional lives of these women, while also recreating the larger social context that defines their choices and chances. Indeed, her exploration of the inheritance of Polish ethnicity forces her to expose the “truthiness” of national and ethnic formation, the vague and shifting relationship of memory and identity to both time and truth in light of the postmodern era’s suspicion of grand narratives.<sup>2</sup>

“That’s all they ever show on television these days, it seems—retrospectives and commercials. Back and forth, communism and capitalism, past and future, and all we can do in the present is stare at both with disbelief. First, all the familiar Solidarity leader from the eighties parade by—Wałęsa, Popiełuszko, Walentyno-

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<sup>1</sup>Michael M. J. Fischer, “Ethnicity and the Post-Modern Arts of Memory,” in *The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986). <http://www.haussite.net/haus.0/SCRIPT/txt2000/08/memo.HTML>, accessed August 29, 2013.

<sup>2</sup>I invoke comedian Stephen Colbert’s satirical term defined as that quality characterizing a “truth” that a person making an argument or assertion claims to know intuitively “from the gut” or because it “feels right” without regard to evidence, logic, intellectual examination, or facts. The term now appears in the *Merriam-Webster English Dictionary*.

wicz, Lis, Gwiazda—followed immediately by dancing chocolate bars and the clean-scrubbed village girls leading cows across meadows.”<sup>3</sup>

The narrator’s skepticism at selling detergent and milk through tropes of folkloric femininity raises the novel’s larger questions of which narratives of Polishness persist and which dominate in the ongoing struggle to define the Polish self. Especially important about Pasulka’s text is her refusal of folkloric nostalgia in creating Polish literary identity. While the rural mid-twentieth century scenes of protagonist Anielica’s garden, home, and wedding lend themselves to picturesque nostalgia, any quaint satisfaction is thwarted as bombs drop and brutal violence erupts in the village. The magical past is also tempered by the alternate chapters that present Polishness not as exclusively part of the folkloric past but, rather, equally engaged in the contemporary struggles of employment, housing, drugs, and relationships, in particular as the main characters navigate post-communist bureaucracy and the struggle to *zalatwić* posts in the university. Simplified narratives of the Polish past are mocked through ironic interrogations of the lies that Poles have told themselves: “It was a bold position to take because everyone knows that Poland did not have air-conditioning, homeless people, good Mexican food, or homosexuals until after the communists left.”<sup>4</sup> Romantic narratives about pre- or post-communist Poland are undermined by the narrator’s ironic commentaries on simplistic explanations. This is a significant achievement for Polish-American literature about Poland, a category in which Polishness has often been romanticized, valorized, and folklorized.<sup>5</sup> Pasulka leaves little room for nostalgia or longing for a Polishness gone by, and she refuses to imagine Poland as removed from (post) modernity. The novel’s contemporary women struggle to pay rent, earn extra cash by taking in foreign tourists as borders, and toil as barmaids in the “new Poland.” The scope and strength of this highly readable, personal novel lies in its illustration of global economic and political forces as they play out in the smallest details of everyday life.

Another strength of the novel is the centrality of female characters, allowing them to speak for themselves, articulating their own ambitions and limitations. The novel understands feminist insights into power and possibility, laying bare the soul- and life-crushing interventions of violence, addictions, and rape in the lives of ordinary women of different ages. From the aging washed-up actress, whose value disappears as her image in the mirror transforms, to the rural heroine, who experiences rape as a tool of war, the novel’s women are marked but not solely defined by the larger brutalities of gender-based violence. “What thus seem initially to be individualistic

<sup>3</sup>Brigid Pasulka, *A Long, Long Time Ago and Essentially True* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009), 11.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 19.

<sup>5</sup>For analysis of this issue in Polish-American literature, see Karen Majewski, *Traitors and True Poles* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2002), and Thomas S. Gladsky, *Princes, Peasants, and Other Polish Selves* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009).

autobiographical searchings turn out to be revelations of traditions, re-collections of disseminated identities and of the divine sparks from the breaking of the vessels. These are a modern version of the Pythagorean arts of memory: retrospection to gain a vision for the future. In so becoming, the searches also turn out to be powerful critiques of several contemporary rhetorics of domination.<sup>6</sup> Fischer's commentary on ethnic fiction explains very clearly the way the voices of individual women work to create and refashion ethnic identity. Pasulka does this quite skillfully by revealing the ways in which identity is passed on (or not) through struggle, in particular confronting the contemporary battles of daughters with their mother's inheritances.<sup>7</sup>

Fischer's claim that the postmodern arts of memory are ethical and future oriented accounts for the forward propulsion of the novel, which, although alternating from the distant to the recent moment, nonetheless has a forward-moving orientation, a resolution that speaks to the possibility of the survival of Polishness in the contemporary era. Pasulka's prose asks us to consider what Polishness means across the range of prewar village life through the era of *Hipermarket Europa*. The novel spans a great deal of personal and political real estate, from its opening moments in "A Faraway Land" to its final chapter, "So That Poland Will Be Poland." It aims not simply at the resolution of individual narratives but, rather, at the ethical question of the future of Polishness. "Though the compulsions, repressions, and searches are individual, the resolution (finding peace, strength, purpose, vision) is a revelation of cultural artifice. Not only does this revelation help delegitimize and place in perspective the hegemonic power of repressive political or majority discourses, it sensitizes us to important wider cultural dynamics in the post-religious, post-immigrant, technological and secular societies of the late twentieth century."<sup>8</sup> When Pan Hetmański, village patriarch and father of Anielica, allows her suitor to build a wall around their cottage, he sets in motion the courtship of key protagonists but also the larger movement of this novel, which is the demarcation of one's own space. "And Pan Hetmański agreed to make it the first project, because, after suffering so many invasions from the Russians, Tatars, Ottomans, Turks, Cossacks, Prussians, and good God, even the Swedes, it is a primal instinct of all Poles everywhere to fence and wall in what belongs to us: our houses, our sheep barns, our communal garden plots, even our graves."<sup>9</sup> This work of demarcation and delimitation mirrors the work of imagining ethnic identity, reinvented and reinterpreted in each generation. Pasulka's novel offers a rich, emotionally compelling, often humorous, eminently readable exploration into that work.

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<sup>6</sup>See Fischer, "Ethnicity and the Post-Modern Arts of Memory."

<sup>7</sup>For excellent essays exploring women in Polish-American literature, see Thomas S. Gladsky and Rita Holmes Gladsky, *Something of My Very Own to Say* (Boulder, CO: East European Monographs, 1997).

<sup>8</sup>See Fischer, "Ethnicity and the Post-Modern Arts of Memory."

<sup>9</sup>See Pasulka, *Long, Long Time Ago*, 15.