

boys. It is not hard to imagine how much more empowering it must have been to boys, who'd grown fenced in but with only the occasional Trabi around, now to be able to steal "real" cars and experience even greater freedom. Getting arrested for this is a badge of honor to these boys, as is doing a short term in the correctional institute. After all, that's where they can get the tattoos that identify them as real toughs—good preparation for the prison time they see as inevitable.

Clemens Meyer's 522 pages may be more than the average reader cares to learn about the lives of teenage boys, but through the voice of Daniel it is certainly rendered authentically, with humor but also a pervasive melancholy. We get a palpable sense of the devastation of so many individual lives that came with the otherwise salutary fall of the Wall.

Ulf Zimmermann  
Kennesaw State University

Ene Mihkelson. **Katkuhaud**. Tallinn, Estonia. Varrak. 2007. 320 pages. ISBN 978-9985-3-1418-0

Literary critics regard Ene Mihkelson's *Ahasveeruse uni* (2001; *The sleep of Ahasuerus*) as the best novel published in newly independent Estonia. In 2006 the University of Vienna awarded Mihkelson the Herder Prize. In her latest novel, *Katkuhaud* (*The plague grave*), Mihkelson continues her persistent exploration of the Pandora's box of the national holocaust. If *Ahasveeruse uni* was characterized by an intense stream of interior voices with blurred boundaries, then *Katkuhaud* employs a more "reader-friendly" monologue. Mihkelson, also a poet, perceives keenly the nuances of twilight and,

regardless of the grim topic, displays a delicate touch with words.

The narrator is a woman from a village burned to the ground by a Red Army destroyer battalion. Before her birth, her father is recruited into the German army. After the war, her parents go into hiding and join the guerillas, whose contacts may have reached as far as the British intelligence. Before Stalin's death, the father is killed during an NKVD raid; escaping reprisals, the mother emerges from the forest. Hiding together with the parents, a man's relationship with the mother and the authorities suggests possible treason. The mother's sister, who took care of the child, abandoned her in a boarding school. Ideological brainwashing causes the "outlaw offspring" to become listless.

The story is told after fifty years of occupation, when the Hamlet-like main character attempts to find out about her father's fate while irritating an opportunist community. The depressing reality that is revealed proves horrific: the redeeming power of truth does not appear between the covers of the book. The novel begins with Tallinn's bronze soldier as an image of a dark cloud and ends without solace: "The eclipse was in me, and I did not manage to get out."

Mihkelson neither condemns anyone nor offers forgiveness. Instead, she explores ontological questions: What makes us human? What are we capable of? What constitutes the self of an individual or a nation? Is identity only a contingent construct or a lasting structure? What is the meaning of history? Is it possible to untangle the knots of society and the psyche? Is forgetting therapy or a crime? In the past such contemplations were censored

in Estonia. The new era appears free but has inherited a great deal of contamination. Will the atrocities of the past haunt us forever like a plague from the grave? she asks. Does self-cleansing create paralysis, and deliberate ignorance prove to be the best remedy after all? Evoking such questions, the writer offers a prolegomena to a discussion of what constitutes true freedom. Our heart longs for purity: a radical x-ray may guarantee immunity against manipulation and simulacra. For her, peace of mind can only be based on truth and justice.

Mihkelson is neither interested in a female perspective nor in postcolonialist trends. Instead, at the core of her work, one might say, lies an "eco-critical" challenge: the survival of a threatened culture.

Arne Merilai  
University of Tartu

Cristina Rivera Garza. **La muerte me da**. Mexico City. Tusquets. 2007. 354 pages. ISBN 970-699-173-5

The cover of *La muerte me da* proclaims, "Un thriller perturbador, el regreso de Cristina Rivera Garza." Indeed, the Mexican writer's latest effort signals her return to the novel. It promises to be as stimulating a read as *Nadie me verá llorar*. Despite the acclaim she has received, Cristina Rivera Garza remains an underread author, although her works have recently become the focus of study in Mexican and U.S. universities.

*La muerte me da* displays characteristics of her previous works—for example, a narrator whose gender is not completely revealed until a few pages into the reading. She also employs here an appealing intertextual dialogue with the words of Argentine poet Alejandra Pizarnik.