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Unspeakable Things By Kathleen Spivack (Knopf 2016)

Review by Doug Holder



If you like a wild ride—with ample doses of magic realism, eroticism, perversion and poetry—then, perhaps the novel “Unspeakable Things” by Kathleen Spivack is just the elixir for your staid existence. Spivack is a noted poet, with a slew of poetry collections under her authorial belt, and a few years back she published a much-lauded memoir of her experiences with Robert Lowell—titled, “Robert Lowell and his Circle.”

In this novel Spivack’s central character --known affectionately as the “Rat” is both a creature and a human. She is a miniature hunch back with a beautiful face, hypnotizing eyes, and a painful and fascinating past. And despite having her curves in the wrong places, she has been ravished in sulfuric splendor by the likes of a well-endowed Rasputin, and an old Austrian doctor who views Hitler as a great man and an object for sexual release.

This all takes place in the early 1940s in New York during World War II. It centers around a group of world-weary Austrian refugees. These immigrants struggle with the open and “can do” sensibility of the new world of America, as opposed to their homeland—one of refinement, high culture, and the highbrow—but also dark and festering-- a place with history and deep-seated racism, etc...

Spivack focuses one family—the patriarch being Herbert-- a well-respected bureaucrat in Austria—with connections. Herbert tries to keep his family in one piece and helps the Tolstoi String Quartet, who have lost their key fingers that are instrumental to play their instruments, as a result of the nefarious rise of Nazism. The fingers are in the hands (pardon the pun) of a warped Austrian doctor named Felix. The way they are secured by the Rat—well, Spivack took my breath away.

The question of the New World vs the Old World is always a subtext throughout this novel. Spivack writes,

“ Home. A different concept in the New World. How to find oneself at home again? Far away, the blanketed cities of Europe huddled, the rust of blood on their stones. All that dark tragic history, that sense of cynicism and fatalism, led to a point of view that would be known in the more dignified sense as “ European Philosophy.” All founded on certainty, fear and the inability to prevent death. Europe reeked of death. As it did of philosophy about death.”(265).

Unspeakable Things’ is a book of poetic flourishes, constant surprises, wonderful characterization-- highly recommended.