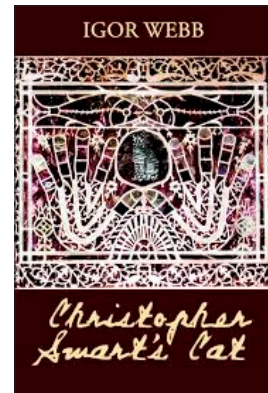


Review of Christopher Smart's Cat

By Igor Webb
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206 pages



Review by Tom Miller

This is not a book about a cat. It is an autobiography...sort of. It is also something of a travelogue-- a rumination through literary minds that the author either knew or was attracted to. It is not a chronological journey so the reader has to relax and go along for the ride as Webb tells of his Jewish family's displacement in 1943 from the village of Malacky (pronounced Malaski) in Slovakia after his grandparents were taken by the Nazis and their sojourn via Ecuador to New York City. He tells of his youth in the Inwood neighborhood where his mother insisted that he pass as a Christian. Being accommodating he became immersed in the Catholic Church somewhat to her chagrin. Webb went on to study at Stanford and do graduate work in London and at some point thereafter became friends with Phillip Roth.

The book is also something of a personal journey in which Webb visits Malacky as if he is trying to gather something of his roots. He describes interesting adventures while there --with references to various village characters from his youth, his family and the surroundings. These stories are told by Reza, his mother's sister or cousin or someone, who is perhaps the most interesting character in the book, but as the reader will discover in a footnote on the very last page also is fictional.

Along the way the reader will bump into not only Phillip Roth but Jorge Gorges, Virginia Woolf, Tomas Wolfe, Victor Hugo, W.G. Sebald, Danilo Kis, Milan Kundera, and Ivan Klima either in a personal way or through Webb's ruminations on their works or their personalities. And of course the reader will be exposed to Christopher Smart and his works. Smart was a perhaps brilliant poet in England in the mid 1700s who had the misfortune to be odd and frequently in debt. Both of these conditions resulted in his imprisonment several times during which he produced widely acclaimed works such as A Song To David and Jubilate Agno as well as anthologies to his cat Jeoffry. (This seems to be the only rationale for the title of the book.)

Webb reflects on various passages from these authors as a memorial or perhaps in a philosophical discourse, and hones in particularly on Smart.

Reading this book is an interesting but perhaps tiring endeavor as Webb jumps forward and backward as thoughts and recollections seemingly strike him. Along the way he just jumps into whatever writer's work seems applicable to those thoughts, and those may lead to tangents and then back, or perhaps not. At any rate do not try to anticipate where this book is going. It will get to the end simply because it is time to end and not for any other reason.