

Tumultuous is one of the words that could describe Vienna between the First and Second World War; crazy is another. In *Gretel and the Great War*, we see Adam Ehrlich Sachs also believes it can be called humorous, and rightly so. Weaving serious topics (such as socialism, fascism, and interwar Judaism) with an endearing father and dry wit, Ehrlich Sachs delivers what may be a literary puzzle—one I am unable to unravel—as a frame story in abecedarian and epistolary form. (For “abecedarian,” we are going with Merriam-Webster’s definition number 1b.: “alphabetically arranged.”)

Set in 1919 Vienna, the titular Gretel is found alone and mute. Unsure of where she came from or who she is, a neurologist searches for any answer to the many questions posed by Gretel’s appearance. The only response he receives is from a patient at the local sanitarium, who claims Gretel as his daughter. For the following twenty-six days, Gretel’s father sends the neurologist bedtime stories for the girl. On the first day, the neurologist receives “The Architect,” then “The Ballet Master,” up until the twenty-sixth day when “The Zionist” arrives. There is no further correspondence.

This all happens on the third page, and the following pages are the stories sent to Gretel. These stories present some rather curious and eccentric characters; we do not see Gretel or her father again, other than the small goodnight comments tacked to the end of each story. We meet characters from a distance, only receiving the necessary descriptions for the individual story to function. We never even learn names with a few exceptions that serve as little more than subtle nods, besides Gretel and the ever-looming Dr. Krakauer, the head doctor of the local Sanitorium. Characters in this story defy all writing techniques taught in creative writing education, yet us readers are attracted to each alphabetically aligned character. What is it about our faceless,

nameless Explorer that engages us so completely? And why do I find myself unable to forget about the Obstetrician? (And the Obstetrician gave birth to *what?*)

I propose this: Ehrlich Sachs is not presenting characters, but setting. Vienna between the World Wars is a location ripe for stories. Historically, Austria (winkingly) found itself the child of a folded monarchy. A series of treaties, à la Saint-Germain-en-Laye, passed Austria from one allyship to another. Interwar Vienna found itself the capital of a rump state, only it was the rump of a rump of a rump. Naturally, this meant many divisive opinions and ideologies fighting each other for dominance, yet this struggle did not deter Vienna from contributing to culture through music, literature, and philosophy at this time. However, we don't see any of Vienna's beautiful side; Ehrlich Sachs doesn't mention Schönbrunn Palace, Albertina, or Belvedere Palace.

Instead of occupying these grand settings, we find ourselves in cafes with revolutionaries, streets that have buildings so mundane they might taint a child's innocence, the City Theater, and of course—perhaps not in but certainly never far from—Sanitarium Dr. Krakauer. It is these locations that show up time and time again, each iteration viewed through a new nameless, faceless person. What is more, these people also repeat: the Lighting Technician “arrives at the City Theater with high hopes of forming warm friendships,” the same City Theater performing the operetta—written by the Choirmaster—that was written “at the impetus of his physician—” yes, that Physician.

This entanglement of person and place, as well as person and person, and not to forget place and place, creates the puzzle aspect of the novel. As the constant intersection of the stories become more numerous and denser, we start to construct a net of understanding; it's the sort of net you can climb to get a higher view and gain a better perspective. And while we weave our net and climb ever higher, we are left little breadcrumbs to the solution for Ehrlich Sachs' puzzle.

(The Immunologist is studying *which* disease? The Father's name is *what*?) We climb higher and higher, and we start to uncover the underlying message of this humor novel and its mad stories. And by the time we reach the Zionist, we find we haven't been climbing the net to gain some sense of understanding; no, we climbed the side of the sanitorium to land ourselves amongst Dr. Krakauer's finest. This novel is a short walk away from creative nonfiction.