

*A Forgotten Genius: In memory of Jan Křesadlo
(1926–1995)*

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One man's multifaceted talent and extraordinary career give pause to think about what a thorny road leads to lasting success and its higher grade, literary immortality.

Václav Jaroslav Karel Pinkava (known by his pen name Jan Křesadlo) grew up as the only and scrupulously guarded child in the family of a wealthy Czech crystal glass industrialist and businessman and from a young age showed extraordinary talent in a wide range of fields. During his school years, his above-average language and mathematical skills soon became apparent, as well as his graphical arts and musical talents.^[1]

But his life progress was soon clouded by unfortunate historical events. The many tribulations of his life began in his Prague grammar school during the Nazi Protectorate. He was expelled from school for fighting with a pro-Nazi classmate. Before he could go on to finish his high school studies, he trained awhile as a pharmacist. Another blow from fate was the Communist coup. In addition to the nationalization of the family's factories and shops, he was, whilst innocent, charged with conspiracy to an armed uprising. After several years of labouring and compulsory military service, he was able to graduate from Charles University in 1954, in Psychology, which was at that time a politically and socially neglected field. His career as a clinical psychologist seemed to be on the rise for a while: he joined forces with renowned sexologist Kurt Freund, under whose direction he participated in important research. In 1968, after the fall of the Prague Spring, he went to England for a pre-arranged business posting, from which he did not return. He and his family settled in the small south-eastern English town of Colchester.

Here, financially secure, he could continue his career as a clinical psychologist on a less significant level than in Prague. Pinkava, who was an excellent diagnostician and a professionally highly qualified specialist, was not always able to get along diplomatically with his

provincial. The misunderstandings and years of greater and lesser irritations led him to retire prematurely in early 1982. His creative work developed intensively only once he retired.

He was acclaimed internationally for his publications in the field of multi-valued mathematical logics, which he indulged ‘merely’ as a hobby (Introduction to Logic for Systems Modelling, 1988).

However, he was more interested in the creative arts. The most extensive and enduring among his works are his writings, although he also painted and drew, and composed several works of music. His literary works, penned under the name Jan Křesadlo during the short remaining thirteen years of his life, became the sensation of the moment among Czech literati.

His first novel, *Mrchopěvci / GraveLarks*, which immediately attracted attention at home, was published in 1984 in the largest Czech emigrant publishing house ‘68Publishers’ and won him the prestigious Czech Egon Hostovský prize.

Thereafter, for a time, Křesadlo came to the attention of the Czech literary public. His work evoked mixed emotions. As an expatriate and an ‘amateur,’ he did not feel compelled to revere the prevailing literary modes back at the homeland he had left, and felt inclined to even ridicule them in various ways. He created his works mainly as a hobby, for his own pleasure, but also through his works tried to deal with the myriad traumas of his life, and his being a solitary outsider among his contemporaries. Borne along by his polymath ‘Renaissance-man’ learning, he freely roamed the literary styles of different times and playfully frolicked among the various spheres of human knowledge. The idiosyncrasies of his style include playing with languages and fanciful etymologies. He also enjoyed deploying traditional genres (ancient Greek epic, animal allegory, youth adventure novel, science fiction, etc.). He takes a particular delight in parodying the narrative methods of the 19th century.

His at times barbed, at other times indulgently ironic approach to human affairs permeates his entire body of work. As a clinical psychologist, the author had profound knowledge of human abilities, morbidities, also taboo sexual and other deviations. Variant sexual proclivities appear in Křesadlo’s works mostly as the embarrassingly humorous urges of people who are essentially decent[2], or else they appear in combination with other negative moral qualities[3]. The breaking of taboos and the more stirring statements in his works sometimes resonated too strongly among some critics and readers, so as to mask the deeper meaning, unique individuality and high artistic quality of these works. It is from the standpoint of a compassionate and profound humanism he searingly and caustically satirizes expressions of human stupidity and deviousness, seemingly ever-present but also characteristic for the particular epoch in which he lived.

Křesadlo struggled throughout his life with his deep-seated Catholic faith. Numerous traces of this can be found in his work, not only in the collection of short stories he devoted

to this topic, *Království české a jiné polokatolické povídky / The Kingdom of Bohemia and Other Semi-Catholic Tales*, 1996. It is an important motif in many parts of his work, e.g. in his *Offering* (1994), which brings us perhaps closest to his life experience as an emigré, or in another excellent work *Skrytý život Cypriána Belvy / The Secret Life of Cyprian Belva* (posthumously, 2007).

Křesadlo's stories reveal a deep knowledge of the human psyche and its functioning through life's twists and turns. But they often take an allegorical form, interwoven with fanciful elements, unexpected associations, and a penetrating ingenuity in which seriousness and playfulness interact. All of this goes to make up the author's unmistakable style, in works such as the sci-fi novel *Fuga Trium* (1988, published back home in 1990), which takes place in a fictional dictatorship on the border of reality and fantasy, or his largely multi-layered *Offering* (1994), regarded by many as Křesadlo's greatest, the 'fantastical farce' *La Calle Neruda* (1995), set in Prague's Lesser Town, the allegorical novel *Dům / House* (posthumously, 1998), which wittily depicts anomalies of the post-Velvet Revolution, *Rusticalia* (posthumously, 2006), a shocking parody of a 19th-century Czech village novel, and the most criticized 'pornofaustic' *The Secret Life of Cyprian Belva* (posthumously, 2007) etc. His critics suggested he was a postmodernist, he maintained that he was not interested in contemporary literary trends and labels.

In the last years of his life, the author was almost volcanically spewing out works that there was no immediate scope to publish, and so, as we can see, the first editions of several of his works date from almost ten years after his death.

Critics were most inclined to note the grim and intimidating aspects of his works. One reviewer of the *Cyprian Belva* novel sums it up as follows:

'The world of Křesadlo is a place of horror and laughter, in which the interested reader is accompanied by a Bosch-style commentator on human existence. It is often an ugly and ridiculous sight, but without it, the truth about life would be incomplete.'^[4]

It needs to be added that human honesty, compassion and friendliness, beauty and the wonders of nature – that is, the vital and fascinating aspects of life, are always present in his works. As an author, he often turns to the reader and makes asides and comments with a slight (self)irony on the works of the given fictional author. In this, his favourite way, the author gives vent to his nostalgia for the traditional human values he thinks to have disappeared from contemporary life.

Toward the end of his life, Křesadlo could scarcely have been satisfied with the time in which he was to live, nor with his own very tortuous career, which in no respect gave him

the opportunity to fully develop and take advantage of his unique talent. But he kept this to himself, with some scepticism, and withdrew more and more unto himself.

All four of his children became highly qualified, interesting people, one of them, Jan Pinkava even achieved world fame in the field of animated film, with two productions that received an Oscar. The first is the short film *Geri's Game* (1997) and then the very good full-length feature production, *Ratatouille* (2007), which he conceived and co-authored. His father did not live to see this acclaim, however.

The uniqueness of Křesadlo's work drew attention for some time after the author's death, yet as time has passed it has been washed over by a flood of novelties, by other, younger authors. Today, few apart from literary historians and a tight echelon of his fans^[5] turn their attention to this great writer.

And that's a pity.

References

- [1] Information on his family background and personal aspects are from my recording of recollections by the writer's son, Václav Z. J. Pinkava, recounted to me at their family home in Moravia during my visit there on May 8, 2019. (Also see www.kresadlo.cz)
- [2] Cf. the character of the orchestra conductor in the 'Bohemia' storyline of the trilogy novel *Fuga Trium* (1988)
- [3] Cf. the character of archivist Dr Pitř in the 'Pangerach' section of *Obětina / The Offering* (1994)
- [4] Jiří Peňás: Pornofaustiáda jako důkaz Boha. / A pornofaustiad as proof of God / Týden.cz, 14.10. 2007
- [5] <https://www.facebook.com/groups/53031442532>