

The Kirschbaum Lectures

Seth Rogoff

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In Seth Rogoff's witty, labyrinthine novel *The Kirschbaum Lectures*, a literature professor delivers twelve cryptic lectures and battles with the school administration.

Sy Kirschbaum is a recognized translator of “challenging European authors like Jan Horak and Anton Grassfield.” He is hired to teach an introductory course at an American college. He arrives there from a clinic in the Czech countryside where he'd been recovering from the trauma of a seventeen-year translation project.

To meet the administration's requirements, Kirschbaum steals a class syllabus from a previous professor and urges his students, if asked, to “pull out Rosinsky's masterpiece and wave it in front of [the dean's or his assistant's] perplexed, bewildered faces.” He lectures on obscure literary works, journal entries, marginalia, and diagnostic summaries from the clinic; harried and unhinged, he reacts to vehement messages from the dean. Dozens of characters appear in his rambling lectures, alongside accounts of Kirschbaum's escapades as a student in Berlin and Prague and esoteric references to Jewish mysticism.

The book is startling and funny, as when Kirschbaum frets that “Girl on the Beach” would have been better titled “Girl at the End of the Sea,” or when a character muses on his professional triumph in rebranding “a line of variously aged Goudas” while acting as the marketing director at a Vermont cheese company. Also brilliant are Jackie K's accounts of working as a human mannequin in a Berlin dress shop and a hilarious missive from the dean, who chides Kirschbaum for his “unsettling” and “disturbing” displays of emotion and reports that students use his course “to a) sleep, b) engage in social media, c) ‘zone out,’ d) doodle.”

The Kirschbaum Lectures is an entertaining literary puzzle; its fascinating web of academic commentary tests the boundaries between fact and fantasy, order and anarchy, and sanity and dreams.

KRISTEN RABE (May / June 2023)

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