

Bauern, Bonzen und Bomben

H.Fallada

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Fallada is somewhat of a hack writer, but an inspired one, not to say an obsessed one. He left a lot of thick novels, although his life was marred by so called substance abuse and alcoholism. But when he got going he stuck with it, writing like mad. His prose is not measured but hurries across the pages, always out of breath.

This is a story, supposedly based on a real event, namely the schism between the Schleswigian town of Neumünster and the surrounding farmers. In the book the farmers around the fictive town Altholm, set in Pomerania, close to Stettin, want to stage a demonstration. The Social Democrats want to forbid it, but the mayor of the town, a huge man part of the party, decides to allow it. Things go wrong, there is violence, and as a result of this the farmers decide to boycott the town, refusing to have anything to do with it, meaning it is fine to sell your produce but not to buy anything. This spells serious trouble for the merchants, and so, the mayor realizes, also for the town itself including his constituency of the workers. There are failed attempts at reconciliation and in the end, when a few of the participants of the demonstration are being charged with violence an extended judiciary process which essentially leads to their acquittance by being given symbolic punishments. The mayor makes a fool of himself during the proceedings and is pressured by his party comrades to resign, very much against his will, as a compensation given another mayorship in a distant town.

There are a lot of actors in the plot, providing many parallel and intertwined stories. The book lends itself beautifully to serialization for TV, and has in fact been so used. There is the press involving the drunkard and swine Stuff, cynical yet driven, and the upcoming young man Tedrup, who tries unprincipled to get ahead, and is in fact killed by mistake as he is about to retrieve a sum of money he had received through selling some compromising photos. None of them are sympathetic, Tedrup squanders any sympathy he might have initially had with the readers by hitting his loving and loyal wife, so maybe his end is not to be regretted. There is of course the mayor, that big man, who does in a sense invite sympathy and perhaps the best delineated character of the lot. As noted before the book has been written at breathless speed, and most characters are just sketched fleetingly.

One may more than eighty years on read the book as a historical document of the concluding Weimar years. Cynical and feverish political games, demonstrations by the KPD and the Nazis, Conflicts between the workers and the farmers, the latter leaning towards a more nationalistic agenda. The Nazis are only mentioned a few times, which is a bit remarkable as the events take place so close to the 'Machtübernahme' but of course they are not set in focus, only serving as part of the backdrop. And it is a sobering thought to realize that history is not preordained, their rise to power was not inevitable, and at the time most people may not have thought that they would play such a decisive role in the fate of the nation. In the book it is the power of the SPD and the conflicts that generates that commands the attention.

Tucholsky in a review of the book lauded it is as the best depiction of life in a small town that he was aware of. Not a literary masterpiece he concedes, but the presentation of the characters, the way they speak, the way they think and bicker among themselves is caught masterly. The author must know the milieu intimately, while still maintaining that distance that is necessary for an author, he concludes.

April 21, 2014 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se