

King of the Badgers

by Philip Hensher; New York, Faber and Faber, Inc., 2011, 448 pages, \$26 hardcover, \$15 softcover

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For his 2008 novel, *The Northern Clemency*, Philip Hensher was a finalist for the Man Booker Prize. In the *King of the Badgers*, Hensher describes the picturesque town of Hanmouth on the British coast. Real estate values are high, and the inhabitants view themselves as members of the upper crust. From the lower-class section of town, however, an eight-year-old girl is kidnapped, which turns the town into a frenzy of media and criminal investigators. This missing-child incident provides further justification for increasing the town's security through the use of surveillance cameras and the constant vigilance of the Neighborhood Watch, a committee of townspeople who track what goes on. In fact, this constant monitoring and recording of people's routine daily activities by closed circuit TV cameras (CCTV) as well as the Neighborhood Watch, headed by John Calvin (note-

worthy choice of name), becomes a major theme for Hensher. Indeed, one whole chapter, "The Omniscient Narrator Speaks," is devoted to the subject of lost privacy.

A longer segment of the novel describes a housewarming party hosted by Hanmouth newcomers Catherine and Alec and their son, David, and his quasi-boyfriend, Mauro. The gathering is dry, staid, and stiff, with its forced, awkward, banal conversations. Harry the gay cheese shop owner and his boyfriend, Sam, briefly attend the housewarming party and, while there, invite David and Mauro, who accept the invitation, to a party they are hosting that same night.

Hensher juxtaposes these two events by shifting back and forth between them. He contrasts the boring housewarming party with the debauched, hedonistic excesses of Harry and Sam's gathering. Their party consists of 14 fat, hairy, gay men, who call themselves The Bears and who get together regularly for sex orgies fueled by substances, including alcohol, cocaine, and "poppers." David is fat, awkward, and shy, but Mauro is an attractive, young,

muscular Italian, whom The Bears quickly descend upon, much to Mauro's delight, while David passively watches and recedes more and more into himself.

Such images are reminiscent of Nietzsche's notion of Greek tragedy, consisting of the core dialectical tensions between Apollonian (measured, temperate, and rational) and Dionysian (instinctive, ecstatic, and extreme) elements. Hensher's book reflects these tensions, as well as perhaps Freud's tripartite model of id, ego, superego. But in Hensher's novel, these are components not of an individual's psychic reality but of a whole community, the town of Hanmouth. Perhaps, John Calvin's Neighborhood Watch and the ubiquitous CCTV surveillance cameras are an effort to maintain strict moral control (superego); the measured, staid, citizens of Hanmouth at the housewarming party may mirror reality (ego); and finally, the libidinous Bears at Harry and Sam's orgy reflect extreme pleasure seeking (id).

Possibly these Dionysian and Apollonian tensions are an essential part of the human condition, and perhaps of communities and society as well, and for this reason, *King of the Badgers* would be of interest to the readers of *Psychiatric Services*.

The reviewer reports no competing interests. ♦

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