

# Paweł Huelle, MERCEDES-BENZ

## *summary*

Paweł Huelle is known as a remarkable storyteller, who keeps his readers interested from the first to the very last sentence. *Mercedes-Benz* is another splendid example of his craftsmanship. The book is written in a form of an extensive letter to the late Czech writer Bohumil Hrabal and it is inspired by Hrabal's novella "Night Driving Lesson".

A relatively young man, Paweł, clearly an admirer of Bohumil Hrabal's writing and story telling art, begins his first driving lesson. He considers himself a completely hopeless pupil, who will never master the wonderful driving skills. His instructor is a beautiful and rather mysterious young Miss Ciwle.

Already at the start of their lessons, Paweł causes some chaos on the road and to hide his fault, he begins to tell the instructor a story of his grandmother's adventure during one of her driving lessons, when her Citroen got run over by a train while she and her instructor miraculously saved their lives. Surprisingly enough the train was not damaged at all and the accident was described even in *The Times*, where it was cleverly advertised as a sort of Waterloo for French cars. The grandmother got a brand new Citroen and the British Rail instantly wanted to use the same type of trains as the Polish Rail. The story then evolves into Paweł's grandparents love story and smoothly continues to the terrible time of World War II. Out of the little gem-like stories that compose the tale, it is worth to mention how Paweł tells the instructor a story of his grandfather's friend, count Sanguszko and his famous Bugatti in which he crushed a cardboard wall just to frighten his old aunt. Then there is of course the long story of famous and beloved family Mercedes-Benz, in which his grandparents chase balloons, pretending they are on a foxhunt. The car is in a way mythical and becomes a symbol of the wonderful and long-lost times of family fortune and good life. Paweł's grandfather eventually loses the car on a secret mission during World War II when the wonderful automobile is confiscated by the Soviets.

After the war his father buys a Mercedes-Benz which is almost identical to the one his grandfather once lost. Already then the car is rather old and provokes funny comments from neighbours and people on the street but it is the sentimental value that really counts.

The stories about family cars are just a part of the narration, the second significant aspect of it is the “relationship” between Paweł, the protagonist, and the beautiful Miss Ciwle. Fascinated by her incredible driving skill and courage, he gradually begins to get fascinated by her as a person. He discovers that she lives in a small hut in the middle of city allotments and that she has lost all she had in order to get money for treatment for her disabled brother. Paweł gets to meet the brother and some homeless friends who tell him stories of miraculously conjured and lost fortunes. They are like an allegory of what has happened to many people who have emigrated in order to find a better life and then came to earn fabulous sums of money they eventually lost because they did not know how to live good lives.

Paweł never gets close enough to Miss Ciwle to establish any relationship; he realises that she is simply a beautiful passer-by in his life, nothing more than a charming memory.

The book ends with the news of Hrabal’s death and a wonderful homage to his writing and his wisdom. It is a scene from a pub in which Paweł and some friends learn about Hrabal’s death and commemorate the great Czech writer by re-telling his novels and writing a petition to the Swedish Royal Academy to honour Hrabal even if posthumously with the Nobel Prize for literature.