

The Age of Adolescence

Ellen Handler Spitz

Jepp, Who Defied the Stars

by Katherine Marsh

Hyperion, 385 pp., \$16.99

THIS PAST SUMMER, with a transfixed ten-year old by my side, I stood in Madrid's palatial Museo Nacional del Prado, face to face with Diego Rodríguez de Silva y Velázquez. We gazed at the self-portrait of this grand master of the bravura brush stroke, gripping his palette in his left hand and wielding a paintbrush in his right, and we admired the wasp-waisted five-year-old Infanta Margarita who poses pertly before him in the endlessly fascinating *Las Meninas*. I pointed out diminutive King Philip IV and his queen, caught in their black-rimmed mirror just left of a coffered door, which opens mysteriously onto a dazzle of light. But about the court dwarfs—Maria Bárbola, with her bulbous head and short arms, and Nicolasito Pertusato, who kicks the lazy mastiff—I had little to say. A barrage of earnest questions from the child beside me exposed a glaring lacuna in my art history background. Why are they there? What are they doing? Were they servants, too? Why did the Spanish court keep them?

As a girl, Katherine Marsh was similarly mesmerized by the dwarfs in Velázquez's masterpiece, and by those that appear in other paintings of the period. To explore their plight, she conceived *Jepp, Who Defied the Stars*—her latest venture into books for young readers. *Jepp* is a first-person narrative, an historical novel set in the Spanish-ruled Netherlands of the late sixteenth century and in Denmark. Permit me a sigh of discontent that *Las Meninas* is nowhere to be found between the covers of her book, for its reproduction would have served as a model for the way that works of visual art can spark literary creation. This very painting, after all, inspired Oscar Wilde's heartbreaking tale of an Infanta who laughs a little dwarf to death on her twelfth birthday.

Throughout *Jepp*, Marsh's well-imagined title character and her other court dwarfs provide answers to some of the questions raised by *Las Meninas*. After a happy childhood in a village near Utrecht, Jepp arrives at the Spanish court of Coudenberg in Brussels to become a court dwarf. He is brought there by a strange courtier, Don Diego (who later proves to be Jepp's absent—and deceased—father's younger brother). At fourteen, the boy is no taller than he was at seven.

In Brussels, the Infanta treats Jepp and his cohort handsomely, but rather like toys or pets. She expects them to amuse and divert her, but they are not regarded as fully human. Courtiers and servants shamelessly touch their bodies *ad libitum*, costume them at will, and make them suffer a host of indignities (Jepp's first is to jump out of a pie served to the Infanta). Far more horrifyingly, a delicate blond dwarf named Lia, Jepp's friend, is victim of a secret rape by a

courtier named Pim. Lia persuades Jepp to accompany her in an attempted escape so as to bear her baby in freedom, but she dies in childbirth.

While it successfully conveys the degradation to which the dwarfs were subjected historically, the inclusion of this dark episode in a book for young readers may expose some pre-teens to an excess of depravity. Before her violation, Lia enjoys a close friendship with Robert, a kindly Hagrid-like giant who is also retained by the Infanta as a grotesque, and the court immediately assumes that it was he who made her pregnant. Marsh's florid evocation of this huge male copulating with this tiny female, even though it proves false, may seem to corroborate widespread childhood fantasies of sexual acts as aggressive conquests.

Eventually Jepp is banished from the Infanta's presence, and his story continues while he is en route to another castle, Uraniborg in Denmark; he is transported there from Brussels in a cage reminiscent of the contraption occupied by the outsized Lemuel Gulliver in *Brobdingnag*. The latter parts of Marsh's novel find him under the aegis of the famous astronomer Tycho Brahe, an eccentric island-dwelling, silver-nosed scientist, whose beer-guzzling moose attends dinner in his castle. Jepp is made to eat on the floor under the table at Tycho's feet.

What makes all this particularly poignant in the context of "young adult" fiction is that Jepp and his cohort—diminutive persons who appear neither adult nor child—can so easily stand in for the book's intended readers. Suffering extreme humiliation, Marsh's characters not only teach historical injustice but, closer to home, they mirror the manipulation, objectification, and failure to be taken seriously that many teens and pre-teens feel they endure under uncomprehending adults. The dwarfs in Marsh's novel, moreover, are propelled by their frustrations into unproductive behaviors: at Coudenberg, one preens constantly before a looking glass, and another is addicted to hippocras. Under conditions of oppression, their relations with one another are tarnished by rivalry and suspicion.

Thus the dwarfs become, in Marsh's skillful hands, supremely sympathetic figures. In pre-adolescence, our bodies morph, betraying us day by day. Alien to ourselves as well as to others, we yearn to shoot up instantly or to stop growing altogether—to shrink back into warm childhood, where right and wrong lay neatly folded in separate piles on a shelf. But the door to childhood is shut. Adolescents are newly encased—like Jepp—in bodies that seem too small (or too large) but never a match for what is inside them, which nobody else can see. Marsh's characters capture many near-ubiquitous experiences of this particular stage of life. Jepp exists in relative emotional isolation: his body, psyche, and surrounds feel intermittently out of sync.

Features of Marsh's plot parallel with psychological acuity deep levels of pre-adolescent experience. Haunted in a fatherless household by the mystery of his paternity, Jepp longs to find his father. The desire to find one's true, lost parents animates, as we know, not only the fantasy lives of youth who have endured bereavement, abandonment, and adoption, but also of many a discomfited teen. During much of Marsh's story, Jepp narrates his adventures while traveling like a small animal in a cage. A rough keeper named Matheus tosses in his daily food, and he knows not his destination. Again, modern echoes abound: despite the plethora of insignificant

choices accorded them, young people's lives are not in their hands, and they often feel cooped up in prisons not of their making. Marsh's doubled narration (Jepp reminiscing about Coudenberg on his way to Uraniborg) mirrors the way youth balks haltingly at the regimentation of cultural clock time (alarm buzzers, class bells), their jerky back-and-forth between outer and inner worlds captured so brilliantly by Bill Watterson in his *Calvin and Hobbes* comic strips. Marsh evokes this wonderfully, with all its puzzling confusion. As one reads *Jepp, Who Defied the Stars*, present and past entangle just as childhood and adulthood spar.

Over the course of this fine novel, what matters principally is that a meek, naïve boy, easily manipulated and duped to the point of endangering himself and his friends, develops—despite his handicap—into a more mature character, capable of assuming responsibility for his choices and responding finally to the devotion of a fiercely independent young woman. Jepp progresses from adoration of frail Lia to love for Magdalene, the daughter of Tycho Brahe, who is not a dwarf. In an image that reverses the Robert-Lia fantasy, Magdalene towers over Jepp, and from her he learns the necessity of accepting fate while acting “out of love rather than fear.”

Caught between worlds, Jepp not only grows up, he becomes real. He exits forever the world of *Las Meninas*, but this time with life and with hope.

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