

Milen Ruskov Thrown into Nature

By Daniel Reid

If you're not already on the bandwagon, I have to tell you: It's time to start smoking. Yes, society will tell you it's "bad for you," and that it "causes cancer," and that "you" will "die." But it's a small price to pay for the glory of tobacco. We've been blowing smoke since 5,000 BC; our long history, cloudy as it may be, is steeped in the traditional lighting of tobacco. As a gentleman, I consider smoking one of life's great gambles, and I would shout as much from the rooftops, if the smoking hadn't limited my ability to shout. What a wonderful pleasure! But from where did that pleasure spark?

Milen Ruskov's new novel *Thrown into Nature* is the relatively true story of 16th-century Spanish tobacco monger Dr. Nicholas Monandes, author of *On Tobacco and its Great Virtues, by Dr. Nicholas Monandes, M.D. LL.D. I.S.O. M.A. D.J. M.C.* The good doctor brought tobacco out of the docks and into the cities as a supposed cure-all. That part's real. Of course, the notion of tobacco's miraculous medicinal benefits is ridiculous, especially considering we're not that far away from four out of five doctors preferring Luckies. So, what we get is a hilarious, quixotic, smoke-filled jaunt around Spain (and England) by a couple of quacks in search of eminence and cash.

Monandes' assistant and protege, Guimarães da Silva, narrates *Thrown Into Nature*. The book itself is da Silva's own treatise, a grab bag of misadventures, absurdly organized to reiterate the powers of tobacco. Tobacco usage chapters set up

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scenarios: “Against Bad Breath,” “Female Swelling,” “For the Treatment of Domestic Animals and the Quick Accumulation of Wealth.” Da Silva is less enthusiastic for adventure than his mentor Monandes is; but aren’t all sidekick narrators begrudgingly dragged into experience?

Da Silva’s thesis (and thus, Monandes’ [and perhaps Ruskov’s, as well]) is that nature wants you dead. “If Nature put on a human face and strolled around the streets of Sevilla, she would have long since been locked up as a dangerous maniac, perhaps even burned at the stake by the Inquisition . . . Yes, Nature is absolutely mad!” The only thing to hold back the madness is the almighty tobacco. Yes, this wonderful weed performs miracles unseen since Biblical times. Monandes and da Silva raise a man from the dead (“Murdered by Nature!”) by bagpiping him with smoke. They cure the worms of the son of King Don Filipe II by smoke enema, piped from the lips of da Silva himself. What makes it so funny is that the smoke treatment typically works, or appears to work anyway, which, of course, is the key to good quackery. When the plague strikes, Monandes consoles our nervous narrator: “It mainly kills off the poor . . . and certainly almost none of the doctors.” (The only doctor he recalled dying from the plague was “jinxed in principle.”) Even as evidence of tobacco’s glory wanes, the two have already established their tobacco careers, which, like our Big Tobacco, means it’s a little too late to quit smoking.

Thrown into Nature is a cynical book, but that’s what makes it so funny. On souls, da Silva says, “Once you’re gone, that’s the end, it’s over. There is no second time. Because Nature really does revolve, but not around your so-called ‘soul.’ She revolves around her own self.” Therefore, “There is hardly anything more natural than hating Nature.”