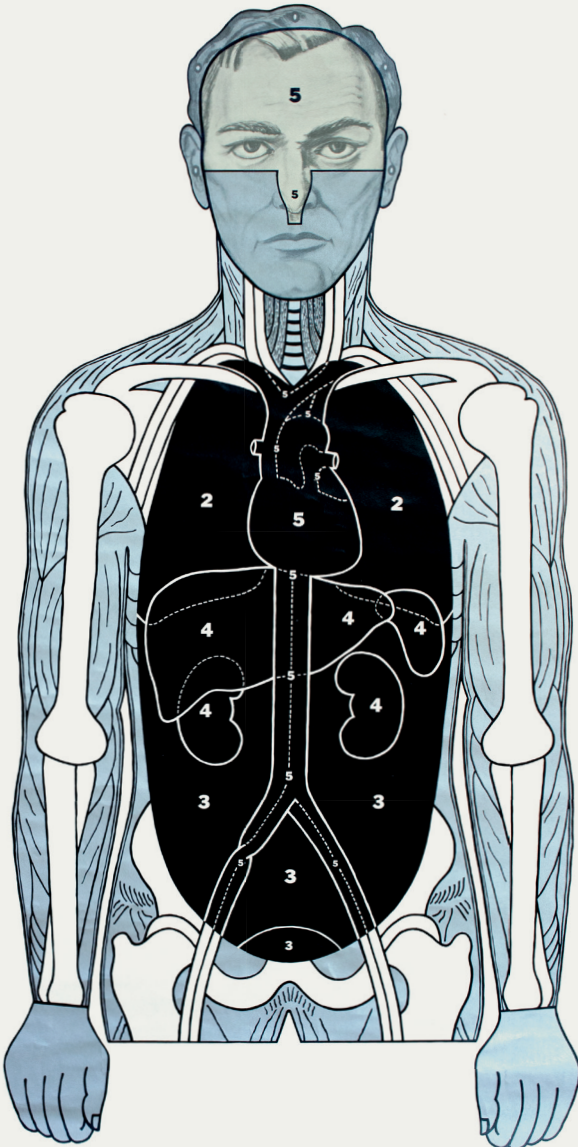




MODERN
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Russell Hoban Kleinzeit



Kleinzeit

'Russell Hoban is one of our greatest, timeless novelists' *The Times*

'Russell Hoban is our Ur-novelist, a maverick voice that is like no other. He can take themes that seem too devastating for contemplation and turn them into allegories in which wry, sad humour is married to quite extraordinary powers of imagery and linguistic fertility' *Sunday Telegraph*

'Hoban is unclassifiable, thank goodness. He is an original; imaginative and inventive. Though some of his work has been compared with that of Tolkien and C. S. Lewis, he is his own man, working his own vein of magical fantasy' *Sunday Times*

'No matter how far Hoban's imagination goes, his books are always convincing, beautifully written and charged with narrative momentum' *Observer*

'Russell Hoban is the most intimate of geniuses. His unique, oblique, animistic viewpoint on love and the world has won him critical panegyrics and legions of devoted fans' Tim Martin, *Independent*

'Hoban's books are always strange lands, full of shadows, secret corners, laughter in dark places, doors that open on to views you don't expect. The light falls differently in his country. Things are not the way they seem, and though at times he tries to make you believe you are standing on solid ground, there's always giddiness just beneath you' Nicci Gerrard, *Observer*

'Hoban excels in the clash of the physical and the metaphysical' *The Times Literary Supplement*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

On his death in 2011, *The Times* described Russell Hoban as ‘perhaps the most consistently strange writer of the late 20th century’. He thought and wrote in an extraordinary range of genres, becoming first a best-selling author of children’s books, particularly the immortal Frances stories and his first novel, *The Mouse and His Child* (1968). After its publication he continued to write for children (most notably perhaps the Captain Najork books and *The Marzipan Pig* with Quentin Blake), but focused most of his energies on a sequence of wonderful novels, which began with *The Lion of Boaz-Jachin and Jachin-Boaz* (1973) and ended with *Angelica Lost and Found* (2010). He also wrote the libretto for Harrison Birtwistle’s opera *The Second Mrs Kong* (1994).

His novels were wildly various, but share his obsession with objects, animals, specific works of art and pieces of music, his love of words and sense of humour. Penguin Modern Classics publishes his first eight novels: *The Lion of Boaz-Jachin and Jachin-Boaz*, *Kleinzeit*, *Turtle Diary*, *Riddley Walker*, *Pilgermann*, *The Medusa Frequency*, *Fremder* and *Mr Rinyo-Clacton’s Offer*.

RUSSELL HOBAN

Kleinzeit



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To Jake

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A to B

There it was again, like a signal along a wire. A clear brilliant flash of pain from *A* to *B*. What was *A*? What was *B*? Kleinzeit didn't want to know. His hypotenuse was on that side, he thought. Maybe not. He'd always been afraid to look at anatomical diagrams. Muscles, yes. Organs, no. Nothing but trouble to be expected from organs.

Flash. *A* to *B* again. His diapason felt hard and swollen. His scalp was dry and flaky. He put his face in front of the bathroom mirror.

I exist, said the mirror.

What about me? said Kleinzeit.

Not my problem, said the mirror.

Ha ha, laughed the hospital bed. It was nowhere near Kleinzeit, hadn't ever seen him, was in another part of town altogether. Ha ha, laughed the hospital bed, and sang a little song that hummed through its iron limbs and chipped enamel. You and me, *A* to *B*. I have a pillow for you at my head, said the bed, I have a chart for you at my foot. Sister and her nurses listen through the night. Drip-feed tubes and bottles, oxygen cylinders and masks. Everything laid on. Don't be a stranger.

Push off, said Kleinzeit. He left the mirror empty and went to his job, staying behind his face through the corridors of the Underground and into a train. Attaché case in hand,

Thucydides under his arm, the Penguin edition of *The Peloponnesian War*. His carrying book, he hadn't begun to read it yet.

NOTHING HAPPENED, said the headline on the tabloid next to him. He ignored it, looked at the naked girl on the next page, then screwed his head round to see the headline again. NOTHING HAPPENED AGAIN, said the headline. Do you mind? said the face that was reading the paper. It turned away with the headline and the naked girl. Brute, thought Kleinzeit, and closed his eyes.

What is there to tell you? he said to an unknown audience in his mind. What's the difference who I am or if I am?

The audience shifted in their seats, yawned.

All right, said Kleinzeit, let me put it this way: you read a book, and in the book there's this man sitting in his room all alone. Right?

The audience nodded.

Right, said Kleinzeit. But he isn't really alone, you see. The writer is there to tell about it, you're there to read about it. He's not alone the way I'm alone. You're not alone when there's somebody there to see it and tell about it. Me, I'm alone.

What else is new? said the audience.

Possibility of nothing this evening, clearing towards morning, said a weather report.

Let me put it this way, said Kleinzeit. This will bring us down to fundamentals: I have a Gillette Techmatic razor. The blade is a continuous band of steel, and after every five shaves I wind it to the next number. Number one is the last, which is of course significant, yes? Then I stay on number one for ten, fifteen shaves maybe, before I get a new cartridge. I ask myself why. There you have it, eh?

The audience had left, the empty seats yawned at him.

Kleinzeit got out of the train, poured into the morning rush in the corridor. Among the feet he saw a sheet of yellow paper,

A4 size, on the floor, unstepped-on. He picked it up. Clean on both sides. He put it in his attaché case. He rode up on the escalator, looking up the skirt of the girl nine steps above him. Bottom of the morning, he said to himself.

Kleinzeit went up in the lift, walked into his office, sat down at his desk. He dialled Dr Pink's number and made an appointment. That's the way to do it, said the bed in the hospital on the other side of town. Sister and I will take care of everything, and you get a bottle of orange squash on your locker like everyone else.

I won't think about it now, thought Kleinzeit. He took the sheet of yellow paper from his attaché case. Thick paper it was, coarse in texture, crude and strong in its colour. It wanted a plain deal table, whitewashed walls, a bare room, thought Kleinzeit. In stories there were plain deal tables. Young men sat at them and wrote on ordinary foolscap. Their single coat hung from a single peg in the whitewashed wall. Were there plain deal tables, bare rooms? Kleinzeit put the paper into his typewriter with a sheet of carbon paper and a sheet of flimsy, shook some dandruff over the machine and began to write a television commercial for Bonzo Toothpaste.

Sister

Sister woke up, got out of bed, rose like the dawn. Rosy-fingered, rosy-toed, rosy-nippled. Tall, firm, shapely, Junoesque. Bathed and brushed her teeth. Plain white bra, Marks & Spencer knickers. Nothing fancy. Put on her uniform, her cap, her firm black Sister shoes.

Ward A4, please, she told the shoes. They took her there. What a pleasure to see her walk! The walls were cool and fresh with it on either side, the corridors smiled with reflected Sister.

In her office Sister did her office things, smoked a cigarette, unlocked the medicine locker, looked out on her empire. Men coughed and groaned, ogling her with eyes that bulged above oxygen masks. Someday my prince will come, thought Sister.

She walked among them, borne gracefully on her Sister shoes, trailing clouds of mercy and libido, followed by the medicine trolley. 'Aaahh!' they sighed. 'Ooohh!' they groaned. Deeply they breathed in oxygen, demurely peed in bottles underneath the bedclothes. Which bed will it be? thought Sister.

It was raining. The daylight in the ward was silvery, musical. The ceiling was ornately braced, like the roof of a Victorian railway station platform. Freshly painted cream-coloured Victorian knee-braces. Silver rainlight, green blankets, white sheets and pillowslips, patients in their proper places, crisp young nurses, blue and white, neatly ministering. Everything shipshape, thought Sister. Which bed will it be?

The Sack

‘How’s it going?’ said the Creative Director from between his sideburns.

‘I think I’ve got it,’ said Kleinzeit from under his dandruff. ‘We open on a man pushing a barrow full of rocks. No music, just the sound of his breathing and the creaking of the barrow and the sound of the rocks bumping along. Then we move in for a close-up. Big smile as he takes a tube of Bonzo out of his pocket, holds it up, doesn’t say a word. What do you think?’

The Creative Director sat down in his tight trousers, didn’t light a cigarette because he didn’t smoke.

Kleinzeit lit a cigarette. ‘*Cinema verité* approach,’ he said.

‘Why a barrow full of rocks?’ said the Creative Director, ten years younger than Kleinzeit.

‘Why not?’ said Kleinzeit. He paused as the pain flashed from *A* to *B*. ‘It’s as good as anything else. It’s better than a lot of things.’

‘You’re fired,’ said the Creative Director in his tapered shirt.

At Dr Pink's

'The hypotenuse is a funny organ,' said Dr Pink in his Harley Street surgery. Dr Pink was fifty-five or so, every inch a gentleman, and looked as if he'd go another hundred years without even breathing hard. There were about £200 worth of magazines in the waiting room. The surgery was equipped with a tin of Band-Aids, a needle for taking blood samples, a little rack of test tubes, and an electric fire of the Regency period. Dr Pink had a stethoscope too. He examined it, flicked some earwax off it. 'We don't know an awful lot about the hypotenuse,' he said. 'Nor the diapason either, for that matter. You can go right through life without ever knowing you have either of them, or they can act up and give you no end of trouble.'

'It's probably nothing, eh?' said Kleinzeit. 'Just this little twinge from *A* to *B* . . .' There it went again, this time like a red-hot iron bar jammed crosswise in him. 'This little twinge from *A* to *B*,' he said. 'Probably everybody has it now and then, I suppose, hmm?'

'No,' said Dr Pink. 'I doubt that I get three cases a year.'

Three cases of what? Kleinzeit almost asked, but didn't. 'And they're nothing serious, eh?' he said.

'How's your vision?' said Dr Pink. He opened Kleinzeit's folder, looked into it. 'Any floating spots or specks?'

'Doesn't everybody have those?' said Kleinzeit.

‘What about your hearing?’ said Dr Pink. ‘Ever hear a sort of seething in a perfectly silent room?’

‘Isn’t that just the acoustics of the room?’ said Kleinzeit. ‘I mean, rooms *do* seethe when there’s silence, don’t they? Just the faintest high-pitched sibilance?’

‘Your barometric pressure’s good,’ said Dr Pink, still looking into the folder. ‘Your barometric pressure’s like that of a much younger man.’

‘I go for a run every morning,’ said Kleinzeit. ‘Mile and a half.’

‘Good,’ said Dr Pink. ‘We’ll book you into hospital right away. Tomorrow all right for you?’

‘Lovely,’ said Kleinzeit. He sighed, leaned back in his chair. Then he sat up straight. ‘Why do I have to go to hospital?’ he said.

‘Best see where we are with this,’ said Dr Pink. ‘Run off a few tests, that sort of thing. Nothing to worry about.’

‘Right,’ said Kleinzeit. That afternoon he bought a pair of adventurous-looking pyjamas, selected from his shelves books for the hospital. He packed Ortega y Gasset, *Meditations on Quixote*. He’d already read that, wouldn’t have to read it again. Thucydides he would carry in his hand.

Arrival

‘Ahhh!’ groaned Sister as she came in Dr Krishna’s arms. ‘You make love like a god,’ she said later when they lay side by side, smoking in the dark.

‘Marry me,’ said Dr Krishna. He was young and dark and beautiful and talented.

‘No,’ said Sister.

‘Whom are you waiting for?’ said Dr Krishna.

Sister shrugged.

‘I’ve watched you walking through your ward,’ said Dr Krishna. ‘You’re waiting for a man to turn up in one of the beds. What’re you waiting for, a sick millionaire?’

‘Millionaires aren’t in wards,’ said Sister.

‘What then?’ said Dr Krishna. ‘What sort of man? And why a sick one? Why not a well man?’

Sister shrugged.

In the morning her firm black Sister shoes took her to Ward A4. In a bed by the window lay Kleinzeit, looking at her as if he could see through her clothes, Marks & Spencer and all.

Hero

Oh no, thought Kleinzeit when he saw Sister, this is too much. Even if I were well, which I'm probably not, even if I were young, which I no longer am, this is far too massive a challenge and it would be better not to respond to it. Even at arm-wrestling she could destroy me, how do I dare consider her thighs? He considered her thighs and felt panic rising in him. Offstage the pain was heard, like the distant horn in the Beethoven overture. Am I possibly a hero? Kleinzeit wondered, and poured himself a glass of orange squash.

Sister fingered his chart, noticed Thucydides and Ortega on the bedside locker. 'Good morning, Mr Kleinzeit,' she said. 'How are you today?'

Kleinzeit was glad he was wearing adventurous pyjamas, glad Thucydides and Ortega were there. 'Very well, thank you,' he said. 'How are you?'

'Fine, thank you,' said Sister. 'Kleinzeit, does that mean something in German?'

'Hero,' said Kleinzeit.

'I *thought* it must mean something,' said Sister. Maybe you, said her eyes.

Good heavens, thought Kleinzeit, and I'm unemployed too.

'I want some blood,' said Sister, and sank her hypodermic into his arm. Kleinzeit abandoned himself to sensuality and let it flow.

'Thank you,' said Sister.

'Any time,' said Kleinzeit.

That's it, he thought when she walked away with his blood, there's no going back now. He sat on the edge of his bed and looked at the monitor beside the next bed. Little blips of light appeared successively from left to right on the screen; blip, blip, blip, continuously they came on at the left, marched off at the right. Do they quickly run round inside the machine and come on again? wondered Kleinzeit.

'Suspenseful, isn't it?' said the young man in the bed. 'Can they go on? one wonders. Will they stop?' He was very thin, very pale, looked as if he might flash into flame and be gone in a moment.

'What have you got?' said Kleinzeit.

'Distended spectrum,' said the imminently combustible. 'If hendiadys sets in everything could go like . . .' Here he did not snap his fingers, but hissed sharply. '. . . that,' he said.

Kleinzeit clucked, shook his head.

'What about you?' said Flashpoint.

'Not sick, actually,' said Kleinzeit. 'Here for tests, that sort of thing.'

'You're sick, all right,' said Flashpoint. 'Hypotenutic, you look to me. Touch of diapason, maybe. Do you pee in two streams?'

'Well, when my underwear's been twisted up all day, you know . . .' said Kleinzeit.

'Keep telling yourself that,' said Flashpoint. 'Never say die. I speak German, you know.'

'Good for you,' said Kleinzeit. 'I don't.'

Flashpoint hissed again. 'No hard feelings,' he said. 'People are looking different lately, maybe you've noticed. The dummies must be changing.'

'The dummies,' said Kleinzeit. 'Oh.'

‘First the dummies in the shop windows change,’ said Flashpoint, ‘then the people.’

‘I didn’t think anybody’d noticed that but me,’ said Kleinzeit. ‘God makes the dummies maybe. Man makes the people.’ He crossed his legs, kicking the flex that led to Flashpoint’s monitor. The plug came out of the wall, the last blip faded and went down in smoke, the screen went dark.

‘Oh God,’ said Flashpoint. ‘I’m gone.’

Kleinzeit plugged in the machine again. ‘You’re back,’ he said. Together they watched the blips moving across the screen. Terrible, thought Kleinzeit. If I had blips to watch all the time I’d want them to stop after a while. Blip, went his mind. Blip, blip, blip, blip. Stop it, said Kleinzeit. He lay back on his bed, the bed sighed.

Mine, said the bed. How long I’ve waited! You’re not like the others, it was never like this before.

In his mind Kleinzeit saw a corridor in the Underground.

Why? he said.

I’m just showing you, said his mind.

What? said Kleinzeit. No answer from his mind. In his body the distant horn sounded.

Our song, said the bed, and hugged him.

Back at his flat the bathroom mirror looked out and saw no face. Do I exist? said the mirror.

In Kleinzeit’s office on the sheet of yellow paper on his desk the man pushed the barrow full of rocks and felt the Bonzo toothpaste tube in his pocket. What kind of a Sisyphus deal is this? said the man. Why Bonzo?

In a music shop a glockenspiel dreamed of a corridor in the Underground.

The Blood of Kleinzeit

‘Hail Mary, full of grace,’ said Sister.

Dr Krishna took his tongue out of her ear. ‘Are you coming?’ he said.

‘Sorry,’ said Sister. ‘My mind was a million miles away. You come, don’t wait for me.’

‘Has the sick millionaire arrived?’ said Krishna.

‘Not a millionaire,’ said Sister. ‘His name means hero.’

‘What do you mean, his name means hero?’ said Krishna.

‘Kleinzeit, his name is. In German that means hero.’

‘Kleinzeit in German means smalltime,’ said Krishna, thrusting a little.

Sister laughed. ‘Only a hero would say that Kleinzeit means hero,’ she said.

Dr Krishna shrank, withdrew, put his clothes on. Sister lay naked on the bed like a horizontal winged victory. Krishna’s mind heaved with longing. He took his clothes off again, threw himself feebly on her. ‘This is goodbye,’ he said. ‘One for the road.’

Sister nodded with closed eyes, thought of Kleinzeit’s blood in the phial she had held, warm in her hand. The tests had shown a decibel count of 72, a film speed of 18,000 and a negative polarity of 12 per cent. She didn’t like the polarity, it might go either way, and the decibels were on the dodgy side. But his film speed! She’d never had an 18,000 before. You can see it in those tired eyes of his, she thought as Krishna came.