

BOOKS

Lars Saabye Christensen, *Bunica mea chinezoaică* (Min kinesiske farmor/My Chinese Grandmother), traducere din limbile norvegiană și daneză cu note de Sanda Tomescu Baciu, Cluj-Napoca: Casa Cărții de Știință, 2022, 232 p.

The aged photo of a ship would normally not determine you to return to the first pages of a text and read it again and again. But if you are the reader of Lars Saabye Christensen's new book, *Min kinesiske farmor* [My Chinese Grandmother], it does. Because Lars Saabye Christensen's text is not only a book about the journey to China that the narrator's grandmother took in 1906, but it is in fact a journey in itself. It takes the reader from the present to the near and far past, from Norway to Denmark and China, as it renders the power of memory and love and the changes that come along with the passing of time. *Bunica mea chinezoaică* [My Chinese Grandmother] is admirably translated from Norwegian and Danish by Professor Sanda Tomescu Baciu, with the financial support of NORLA (Norwegian Literature Abroad) and appeared in 2022 at Casa Cărții de Știință publishing house. It brings a flood of memories revolving around *S/S Protector*, whose picture we can see on the cover of the Romanian



translation of the novel, thanks to Professor Sanda Tomescu Baciu and M/S Maritime Museum of Denmark.

S/S Protector is the ship Jørgen Christensen, the grandfather of the writer, takes to Hong Kong, in 1906. He is followed, a few months later by Hulda Christensen and their story becomes the plot of Lars Saabye Christensen's text. Not a fictional novel *per se*, since we have all these names that are connected to the writer's past, but not an autobiography either, *Bunica mea chinezoaică* [My Chinese Grandmother] is the novel that Lars Saabye Christensen confessed to have always wanted to write (23), because he no longer wants to find himself, but to find others and most specifically, his grandmother (91).

What the critics named a "non-fictional book" is in our opinion one of the best fictional books Lars Saabye Christensen has written so far. The writer is one of

the most important voices in contemporary Norwegian literature and a well-known name in Romania, as several of his texts are already translated, for example, *Beatles*, *Vizionare (Visning)* or *Frați pe jumătate (Halvbroren)*.

Bunica mea chinezoaică [My Chinese Grandmother] is structured in thirteen chapters and one epilogue where the writer alternates the references to the letters kept from his grandparents with fragments from his own journal, historical documents, obituaries, memorials and photos, outlining the love that his grandparents shared, but also the love for his family and especially for his grandmother. This very intense book, with multiple historical testimonials keeps you alert at all times, as the pages seem to be interconnected and jump from one story to another. There might be a slight confusion while reading about all these elements occurring at the same time. But *Bunica mea chinezoaică* [My Chinese Grandmother] is an exceptional and in depth bitter-sweet text, a tribute to the close relationship between language and memories. It suggests the fact that you cannot really know somebody, and that we don't remember what we experience in our everyday life, but only the exceptions, the absences, the static part of life's dynamics. Cristensen's talent to blend literature, history and philosophy is definitely mirrored by an experienced translator whose ability to recreate the atmosphere in the text with such acuity is the expression of a job well done. Professor Sanda Tomescu Baciu, founder of the Norwegian Language and Literature Bachelor Programme at the Faculty of Letters from Babeș-Bolyai University, creates cultural frameworks and helps the

reader comprehend the complexity of the original text, by adding explanatory notes. And they are indeed useful, as the book rests on metaphors and visual images.

But even if the stories describe several centuries and characters, they always refer in one way or another to two pillars: on the one hand the father – whose ageing makes him write a list with names of guests he wants at the celebration of his 90th birthday, comprising both living and deceased family members (176), because they all have a place in his memory and because time is relative – and his grandmother. Several phrases related to time are important in *Bunica mea chinezoaică* [My Chinese Grandmother]. In the first pages we find out that there is a discrepancy in the writer's and his father's perception of time (8), and that writing, death and clocks are sometimes synonyms for Lars Saabye Christensen. Then we read about the notebook that the young Lars receives from his grandmother, where he writes the names of the streets he delivers flowers to and blends them with his first poems. We also find out about H.C. Andersen's fairy tales or about the postcards sent by Hulda Christensen. As the father reconnects to the world, in his last journey through the city, stopping on Kirkeveien, Briskeby, Skovveien, Bygdøy allé before arriving at Gabels gate 19 for his anniversary, one cannot stop wondering if this book isn't a sort of journey that Lars Saabye Christensen takes himself within the frames of his memory and past, and if the boy his grandmother sees in the last scene of the text, *in a shadow on the stairs*, is not actually him, the writer that *[we] will always remember*, even if *[he] will soon forget us* (230).

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